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Hijab in Transition
Dress Code Changes amongst Iranian
Diaspora in London

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Submitted for MPhil in Social Anthropology

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MPhil Social Anthropology

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Hijab in Transition:
Dress Code Changes amongst Iranian Diaspora in London

This thesis explores the factors that influence Iranian women's choice of hijab and its transitions. Compulsory hijab in Iran and even voluntary practice of hijab exert a great deal of influence on the lives of the Iranian women worldwide. My thesis investigates how cultural, social and political factors interweave with theological and jurisprudential debates leading to diverse forms of practicing hijab and its transitions in one's life. For the first time in the anthropology literature, my thesis portrays and explains the current status of, and developments in, hijab amongst Iranian women who have been raised in Iran and now live in London. My research is based on the data and cultural knowledge I gathered through conducting 40 in-depth interviews with Iranian women in London, and interviewing four prominent male Muslim intellectuals, scholars and clerics who have worked on and talked about hijab in Iran (Kadivar, Eshkevari, Fanaei, and Torkashvand). In addition to narrating the history and transformations of hijab policies and hijab jurisprudence in Iran from the constitutional revolution to the present, in this research, I have identified five schemas of dress code amongst Iranians in London (full traditional hijab, full progressive hijab, partial-hijab, conservative scarf-less and radical hijab-less) which challenge the current categorizations and generalisations regarding the hijab. By describing the features of each of the schemas this thesis provides a useful descriptive and explanatory tool that will enable a better understanding of hijab dynamics among Iranian women in London. I have demonstrated that hijab is a very fluid term. Hijab varies between individuals in practice, style, rationale, and purpose, and it is neither simply oppressive nor empowering.

I hereby declare that this theses has not been submitted in whole or in part to any other University for the award of any degree.

Signature

Zahra Jalaeipour

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Note on Translation and Transliteration

In this thesis I have translated all the interviews from Persian to English myself. For the transliteration of Persian words I have followed the Iranian studies scheme shown on the table below.

With the exception of the ‘ to signify the Arabic letter ‘ayn (as in ‘shari’a’ and ‘marja’iyya’) and ` to represent hamza (as in ‘Kho’i’ and ‘Qur’an’), diacritics are not used in this thesis. The hamza itself is only used when it occurs within a word (as in ‘Khamene’i’) but not when it occurs at the end (thus “ulama’ rather than “ulama”). With the two notable exceptions of the terms “ulama’ (singular “alim’) and ‘maraji’ (singular: ‘marja’), the plural forms are usually indicated by adding an s to the word in the singular, as in “fatwas” (rather than “fatawa”).

Iranian Studies transliteration scheme

Consonants

z	ض	b	ب
t	ط	p	پ
z	ظ	t	ت
‘	ع	s	ث
gh	غ	j	ج
f	ف	ch	چ
q	ق	h	ح
k	ک	kh	خ
g	گ	d	د
l	ل	z	ذ
m	م	r	ر
n	ن	z	ز
h	ه	zh	ژ
v	و	s	س
y	ی	sh	ش
‘	ء	s	ص

Vowels

IX

short	long	diphthongs
a (as in <i>ashk</i>)	a or ā (as in <i>ensan</i> or <i>āb</i>)	-
e (as in <i>fekr</i>)	i (as in <i>melli</i>)	ey (as in <i>Teymur</i>)
o (as in <i>pol</i>)	u (as in <i>Tus</i>)	ow (as in <i>rowshan</i>)

Glossary

Awrah: (pudendum) in Islamic *fiqh* refers to the parts of the body that need to be covered in prayer and in front of men who are *namahram*.

Basij: paramilitary establishment founded after the Islamic Revolution by Ayatollah Khomeini. It consisted of volunteer civilians who initially joined to take part in the Iran-Iraq war.

Chador: a long round black fabric that covers from the head to toe. There are different types of *chadors* used by Muslim women in different parts of the world. The Iranian *chador* is open in front and women hold it with their hands.

Chaqchur: very loose trousers that women wore to cover from their waist to their toes.

Fatwa: a technical term meaning the jurist's legal judgment on specific topics in Islamic jurisprudence.

Fiqh: refers to jurisprudence, and means 'understanding' and 'knowledge'. *Fiqh* is the intellectual activity of trying to discover divine blueprints, bringing rules and legal systems out of the divine terms, and enforcing duties upon believers.

Gashte ershad: means moral police. It is the branch of police in the Islamic Republic of Iran responsible for fighting against those citizens who do not obey the conventional Islamic codes of dress and behavior with the other sex—for example, women who do not follow a proper Islamic dress code or women or men who engage in 'improper interactions' with the other sex. The moral police are located in important and crowded parts of the city, and they have large vans that drive around the city. They will first tell women to cover their hair, and if the women disobey they arrest them.

Hadith: refers to sayings and acts of the Prophet Mohammad and twelve Shia Imams.

Haraam: In Islamic law there are a number of key essential terms, which the jurists use to explain the permissibility of a certain action by Muslims. *haraam* is the term used for those acts that are completely forbidden like drinking alcohol.

Hijabi: the term used for women who wear hijab.

howze: is an Islamic Shia centre of learning that educates students in Islamic *fiqh* (jurisprudence). Najaf in Iraq and Qom in Iran are the two leading *howzes* in the Shia world.

Ijtihad: is an Islamic term that refers to making religious decisions based on rational deduction from the traditional sources of religious law. *Ijtihad* requires a full knowledge of theology, revealed texts, and legal theory, as well as competence in legal reasoning and a complete knowledge of Arabic.

Mahram: refers to husband and all male relatives with whom marriage is forbidden i.e. father, son, brother, uncle, father-in-law, nephew, grandfather and mother's and father's uncles. According to mainstream Islamic jurisprudence women should wear hijab in front of all men other than the ones mentioned who are *mahram*.

Manto: a type of clothing similar to a dress or long tunic that covers the body, has long sleeves, and is loose enough to hide the shape of the body. According to the Islamic republic of Iran all women are obliged to wear *manto* in public.

Magna'e: a kind of headscarf, which is closed in front, and only the face is evident. It is obligatory for all females to wear it at schools, universities and offices.

Marja: means religious reference and refer to those clerics who have the authority to make legal decisions in the Islamic law for their followers. In Shia Islam after Quran, prophet Mohammad and the Imams, *marja* is the highest authority.

Mustahab: in Islamic law there are a number of key essential terms, which the jurists use to explain the permissibility of a certain action by Muslims. *Mustahab* is one that means recommended or favoured but not obligatory or compulsory.

Mujtahid: an Islamic scholar who exercises *ijtihad* and is an expert in interpreting Islamic law. *Mujtahid* exercises *ijtihad* on the basis of Quran, Sunna, consensus (*ijma*) and reason (*aql*).

Namahram: are men who are not *mahram*.

Piche: a piece of fabric that women used to cover their face, tied to their head with a ribbon. It is not used in Iran today.

Resale: a manual of practical rulings on Islamic law. Every *marja* has a *resale* for their followers.

Rusari: a square shape scarf that anyone can find in London's shops. It is the most popular style of head covering used by Iranian hijabi women.

Ramadan: is one of the Islamic calendar months, during which Muslims from all around the world fast. Fasting is one of the five pillars of Islam, and it is obligatory for all Muslims except the ones who are ill or travelling. Fasting lasts from dawn in the morning until the sunset of the same day, and observant Muslims should not eat, drink, smoke, or have sexual intercourse during the fasting period.

Vajeb: In Islamic law there are a number of key essential terms that the jurists use to explain the permissibility of a certain action by Muslims. *Vajeb* is an act that is compulsory for Muslims (like praying five times a day and fasting during Ramadan).

Chapter One: Introduction

I have often found myself drowning in deep thought, reliving those significant moments in my life that have greatly affected and influenced me. One such reverie related to my hijab: how I came to wear it, what it meant to me, and how I perceive it today. Until recently, my hijab was a part of me: an appendage the presence of which I rarely felt or questioned because I relished wearing it as a practicing Shia Muslim. The term 'hijab' is more than a topic of a research for me. Hijab is more than a concept or practice for me. Hijab has been a part of me since childhood, and therefore my own understanding of hijab has been very central in this research.

I can remember the questions that I had in mind as a child when I encountered women who did not cover their hair properly. Although my educated non-imposing parents had raised me in a relatively liberal manner, my school and peer-group socialisation had shaped my thoughts in a way that made me wonder why others showed their hair even though they knew that they would 'burn in hell'. I cannot describe my shock the first time that I left Iran at the age of eight and encountered women without hijab at London's Heathrow airport.¹ I was very careful not to let any of my hair be seen. At that young age I thought that if my hair came out I would die immediately and go to hell. I did not know why women wore hijab. I took it for granted, and thought that was how it should be. Even when my family lived in London when I was between the ages of eight and ten, I would tell my English classmates at school, "You should cover your hair, otherwise God will punish you." One night, I cried under my duvet because I thought that a houseguest had seen me through the open door of my room while he was talking to his mother, who was sleeping next to me. There were several similar incidents when a male relative who was not *mahram*² saw me by mistake, and each time I cried because I thought I had committed a sin, despite my father, as a Muslim intellectual, assuring me that I had not done anything wrong. The very fact that my mother - as my role model - had

¹ In post-1981 Iran state-sanctioned law requires all women, irrespective of their religious belief, to wear a kind of hijab in all public spaces. Women are allowed to be hijab-less in private spaces.

² *Mahram* refers to husband and all male relatives with whom marriage is forbidden i.e. father, son, brother, uncle, father-in-law, nephew, grandfather and mother's and father's uncles. According to mainstream Islamic jurisprudence women should wear hijab in front of all men other than the ones mentioned who are *mahram*.

chosen to wear hijab was enough to make hijab desirable for me and to worry me if I were seen without it.

I tell my own story here because it led me to initiate the research for this thesis. After I came to London for my Masters and subsequent PhD, many aspects of my views about hijab changed. I encountered many Iranian women, some who were my friends, who removed their headscarf or hijab after living in London. I always questioned why they changed their views. However, I found myself questioning hijab more closely after I started this research. My doubt was instigated by a book written by Iranian cleric Alireza Torkashvand (2010) about the history and evolution of the hijab at the time of the prophet Mohammed.

Torkashvand argues, based on historical and jurisprudential evidence, that the hijab the prophet Mohammad stipulated for women to wear was quite different from how it is currently understood.³ For me, this was a momentous realization. Although in theory I have altered my views, I still wear hijab as I have always done. There seems to be a disjunction between my ideas and beliefs, and the heavily significant and demanding act of wearing the hijab in public. Nonetheless, after engaging with the new interpretations and jurisprudential rulings about hijab, many things changed. I became interested to see how other women understand and perceive hijab. If they were practicing hijab, I became interested in how and why they practice it. Along with the answers provided by my informants, as far as my study required, I tried to understand the everyday living contexts of Iranians in London from multiple angles.

Aims and scope

In this research, I investigate the features, motivations, implications, and changes in the practice of hijab amongst the Iranian diaspora in London. I begin by clarifying what women from different groups understand the hijab to be, how they practice hijab, how this understanding changed after they moved to London, and how they react to other women who hold and display different viewpoints on the subject. I would like to understand how their social interactions have changed since leaving

³ Torkashvand argues that the Prophet Mohammad told Muslim women to cover themselves from the lower neck to the knee. This is in contrast with common juristic position on hijab (see Chapter Three).

Iran, and which factors caused this change. While I focus on their hijab transition after leaving Iran, I also consider these diasporic women's recollections of experiences in Iran.

The secularization debate has been one of the most controversial debates over the last few decades in social sciences, including anthropology. My study will attempt to push the boundaries of this debate further by examining the developments of hijab of women who have lived in Iran, a Middle Eastern country that has been in the spotlight in most public and academic debates about the contemporary role of religion. The occurrence of the Islamic revolution in Iran (1979), followed by a broad 'Islamization' of society, led to some unique consequences with regard to the religious life of women in Iran. Although the occurrence of the Islamic Revolution in Iran is often regarded as evidence of the revival of religion, there have not been many anthropological studies of what this development involved in terms of changes in the daily stylistic choices and dressing of Iranian women.

Public religiosities have emerged globally and have challenged the classical social scientific belief that as societies become more modern they become less religious (Weber 1993). According to Max Weber and most classical social theorists, religion and modernity are not compatible. The mainstream of contemporary anthropology and sociology of religion, however, has questioned the assumption that religion will necessarily decline at both macro- and- micro levels as modernity and modernization expand in a given society (Osella & Osella 2006). One of the starting questions, therefore, examines the causes of new religious revivals, including Islamism.⁴

According to Asef Bayat (2007a), Islamism seeks to build an ideological community. Islamism imagines Islam as a "complete divine system with its superior political model, cultural codes, legal structures and economic arrangements—a system that responds to all human problems" (Bayat, 2007b, p. 14). At the core of Islamism is a mixture of obligation, piety and duty. The 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran is one

⁴ Islamism refers to a variety of contemporary social and political movements inspired by Islam that center on "the belief that Islam should guide social and political as well as personal life" (Berman, 2003).

example of Islamism. Bayat first used the term post-Islamism to describe the situation in Iran after the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) and subsequent reconstruction under president Rafsanjani (1989-1997). Bayat (2007b, p. 19) states that post-Islamism is an “endeavour to fuse religiosity and rights, faith and freedom, Islam and liberty.” While Islamism emphasizes duties and a unified voice, post-Islamism highlights rights and plurality.

My study attempts to deconstruct the hijab outside of an overtly religious framework in order to articulate its processual, temporal, and contextual understandings by and interpretations amongst Iranian women in London. Drawing on my ethnographic research, I argue against the common assumptions that Islam is monolithic, static and incompatible with modernity. I contest stereotypes that Muslim women who wear hijab are oppressed or backward thinking, but I also contest the assumption that hijab is empowering in all cases and situations. In my analysis, I deconstruct the idea that wearing the hijab necessarily signals a religious or religio-political expression of identity, or that it equates unproblematically with piety.

My main research aims are to understand what hijab means for Iranian Shia women living in London, their different schemas of dress code, how this has changed amongst different groups of women and more importantly why this change or shift has occurred. Towards the end of identifying the causes or reasons behind this shift, I also want to determine factors that contribute to changes of attitude towards hijab, including the diaspora conditions, residential location, occupational specialisation of students, family contexts, ‘styles of religiosity’, age, marital status, occupation, friends, social networks, political orientation and personal histories.

In my research on the concept and practice of hijab and veiling, I critically engage with ‘Islamic feminism’ (see Afshar 1999; Badran 1991; 1996; Mahmood 2001; 2004; Moghissi 1991; Poya 1999; Tabari 1986; Mir-Hosseini 2000). One way of looking at feminism is the concern with ‘female subordination’ or ‘male dominance.’ More recent broader definitions include attempts to increase women’s rights and opportunities (Torab, 2006). These debates are multi-faceted and complex and they emerge out of the context of engaging with modernity in Muslim contexts. What I

have tried to do in this area is to provide a narrative of the broader themes of the contested areas and suggest by way of my case study an addition to these debates.

Hijab plays a significant role in the daily life of the women in my study. It is shaped not only by the personal experience of individuals, but also by the historical contexts from which they arise. Therefore, this research will examine the context of the Iranian diaspora living in London, and the effect of modern Iranian history on their way of thinking and negotiating daily life.

It is important to see how the notion of hijab and its definition have changed throughout history, and how they have been affected by political developments, especially those in 1936 and 1979. In 1936, Reza shah banned the hijab in Iran. This led to a radical change in the way people wore hijab. In 1979, Iran faced the Islamic revolution. A year after the revolution, wearing hijab became compulsory. This new policy on hijab also produced shifts in religious beliefs. Understanding this shift is essential to understanding the dynamics of Shia Iranian identity and how the concept and practice of hijab is conceptualized in the contemporary world.

This study is not attempting to describe and explain the current status and changes of hijab amongst 'Shia women' in general. The focus is limited to a sector of the female Iranian Shia diaspora in London and changes in their ideas and experiences regarding the hijab as compared to the time they lived in Iran. I examine the relations between gender, identity, modernity, and the ideas of homeland and diaspora. In doing so, my study considers aspects of both 'embodied piety' and 'discursive piety' since hijab is both a kind of clothing and a product of discourse of covering, as Deeb (2006) highlights.

Embodied piety is the way that religion becomes visible through bodily practices. This can occur in many ways, but according to Lara Deeb (2006), the most visible form of embodied piety is dress and hijab: the way Shia women dress up in society and the way they practice their belief in being a pious woman by wearing specific clothes and covering their hair and parts of their body. Discursive piety (Deeb, 2006, p. 118), on the other hand, accounts for foregrounding the pious dimension of hijab amongst scholars and the veiled women themselves as piety is also inscribed in

pious discourse which is spread, debated, authenticated and re-evaluated during social gatherings and interaction.

Background

There is no clear-cut category of hijab. Muslims around the world have many different ways of practicing hijab. When we talk about the veil or hijab, the most common image that comes to the mind is the headscarf. But the headscarf is not worn alone; there are many different ways a woman can observe hijab in her choice of clothing. Hijab has different shapes and styles in different Muslim countries and contexts. The most conservative form of hijab is the face covering that is common in societies like Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan which results from the jurisprudential interpretations of the Muslim communities living in these countries. However, covering the face is not common in Iran today. The most conservative Iranians wear a black *chador*, but they no longer wear a *piche* (face veil), which was worn before 1936.

Hijab is not a word with a fixed and certain meaning. Unlike what comes to many people's minds, hijab has many different interpretations and there are many ways women practice it. One objective of my research is to challenge the idea of a singular definition; therefore, I avoid providing a monolithic and single definition of hijab here. The most general, dominant and conventional definition of hijab is the act of covering all parts of women's body except for the hands and face. However, hijab is not only about physical covering. It is a set of codes of behaviour that defines relationship of Muslim women with men in society.

According to Shia jurisprudence, there are different requirements for women's coverings. We must note here that when we speak of Shia jurisprudence, we are referring to a fluid set of doctrines with various degrees of diversity. Expressions of these jurisprudential rulings may be different from country to country (as one might see in the cases of Lebanon and Iran). The predominant view is that a woman should cover all parts of her body except for the hands and face, and wear loose clothes to hide her shape. In the following paragraph, when I use the word hijab, I refer to this

conventional form, but not all women who self-identify as hijabi (a term I use here for women who wear hijab) follow this definition.

There is a wide range of literature on hijab and veiling from different perspectives, because hijab has been an important issue of struggle between traditionalists and modernists. It has been used as an index to gauge the emancipation or repression of women. On the one hand, early Iranian feminists, in line with modernist views, assumed that hijab is a form of female confinement (see Naghibi 1999); this approach was of course influenced by a secularist approach to feminism. On the other hand, a growing number of scholars argue that the claim about the subjugation and oppression of hijabi Muslim women has been overstated (see Ahmed 1992; Guindi 1999; Mahmood 2004; Sandikci & Ger 2005; Mir-Hosseini 2007; Alvi et al. 2003; Bowen 2008; Shirazi 2003). Based on my ethnography, I argue against this binary of hijab as oppression or empowerment. The concept and practice of hijab and the incentives for its use are far too complicated to be reduced to such dualistic generalisations. One must separate different spheres and motives regarding hijab. Whether it is oppressive or empowering differs from individual to individual and from context to context.

The words 'hijab' or 'veil' are found in many book titles in the social sciences. There is a vast literature on the politics of hijab, but there has been relatively little work done on its practice. Anthropologists have conducted research on hijab practice, giving voice to women from different parts of the world. Some of this work has been done in the Islamic countries and some in the diasporic Muslim communities of the West. The latter work has focused on second and third generation Muslims who have been born and brought up in the West (e.g. Alvi et al., 2003; Kariapper, 2009; Tarlo, 2009). The kind of diaspora I deal with is different because its members were not born in London. My informants were all raised in Iran, and therefore the media and educational milieu in Iran has played a significant role in their lives. Their identity, as a result, has been shaped differently from Muslims who were born in London or other Western cities. My research is distinct because I examine how these women have changed after moving to and living in London.

In line with Emma Tarlo's (2009) work, I will show that, unlike what some people believe about hijab making women invisible, the headscarf makes women more visible in London. Tarlo argues that Muslim fashions and anti-fashions are reduced to binary opposition between veiled and unveiled. She believes that this results in conceptual blindness, and argues that we should move beyond relating the oppressed and submissive to the veiled women and the liberated, free and progressive to the unveiled. She argues that this reduction has led to state sanctioning of cultural stereotypes and has shaped policy. She demonstrates that however personal a woman's decision to adopt hijab is, it is always influenced by social interactions and discourse which both form and are formed by it, a view that also complements my research.

Discourse is central to this research.⁵ In light of theories of discourse, the meanings of hijab and veiling can be seen as a discursive construct. Amongst the most influential cultural elements that form the meaning of hijab are the teachings and rhetoric of religious leaders who consider veiling an integral part of religious life along with the exclusion of unveiled women from organised religious rituals and institutions. It is also important to note that beside the issue of teachings and rhetoric, the dominant (almost total) majority of religious leaders are male and there are very few female religious authorities who can shape the discourse based on their authority.

Understanding what hijab entails for Muslim women requires more than seeing them and interviewing them. To have a fuller appreciation of what it means for a woman who comes from Iran and lives in London to observe hijab, one needs to be a 'hijabi' oneself. This is particularly important for appreciating the dynamics of embodied piety. As I mentioned earlier, there is a large literature on veiling and hijab, but none of the writers of these works are hijabi themselves except Katherine Bullock, though after the completion of her research she started veiling. Other

⁵ Discourse is about both language and practice. As Michel Foucault first elaborated, discourse constructs the topic and is "a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – a way of representing the knowledge about – a particular topic at a particular historical moment. ... Since all social practices entail meaning, and meanings shape and influence what we do – our conduct – all practices have a discursive aspect" (Hall 2001: 72). According to Foucault, nothing that is meaningful – including Hijab, the subject of this thesis – exists and operates outside discourse and power-relations.

authors do not observe the conventional hijab, and the majority of those who have worked on hijab in the Iranian context are not hijabi either. This is an important point to take into account because the issue of hijab is not merely a detached academic interest; women who practice it or are influenced by policies and doctrines of hijab face authentic existential issues. Therefore, writing about hijab, interrogating it, problematizing it by someone who indeed practises hijab in one form or another brings a new perspective to the field and gives fresh insight into the dynamics of the practice of hijab.

My own story and the journey I took are therefore rather unique, both from the beginning and especially during the years of my PhD, because as an insider I can feel with my flesh and bone what hijab means. At the same time, I agree that being an 'insider' could have blinded me in some ways. I have, however, tried to minimize this blindness by cultivating a comparative approach through sympathizing with works of others who have studied hijabis as outsiders. Overall, my situation is different from that of most scholars who have worked on hijab.

Before starting this PhD, I believed that I had chosen to wear hijab, and as a practicing Muslim I was quite confident that the requirement to do so came from the word of God.⁶ I frequently debated with my friends about hijab and the reasoning behind it. I believed that those individuals who practiced hijab very strictly both thought and acted like I did. I hypothesised that Iranians in London who wore hijab did so because they believed it was a religious requirement, that they did so with consent, and that it was their choice. I believed that through my research I could show that, unlike the media portrayal of women oppressed by their hijab, there were people like myself who had truly chosen to observe hijab. All these pre-suppositions were refuted in the course of my research journey.

I read Torkashvand (2010) at the beginning of my PhD in 2010. After I started reading and doing fieldwork, many things changed, and I drew conclusions that I had not earlier thought of or predicted. When I started my research, I had not

⁶ In this thesis, by stating someone believes in hijab, I mean he/she believes Muslim women should wear hijab as a religious obligation and that hijab is divinely mandated by Allah through Prophet Mohammad.

imagined that I would come to the conclusions I have now reached. My results were both valuable and painful to me. I started this journey to explain the transformation of hijab, but as subsequent chapters reveal the place where I am standing now is quite different from where I started.

Themes

In my research, I approach hijab as a fluid term, configured by the following factors:

1) Location, including Iran and London, 2) Temporality, including the period of history considered, 3) hermeneutics of approaches to the Quran and *hadith*, which jurists employ to interpret these foundational texts in multiple ways, 4) Individual circumstances, including family histories and women's own perspectives.⁷

From my research, I identify five schemas of dress code amongst diasporic Iranian women governing how they approach hijab while living in London. I will talk about the five-part scheme in detail in Chapter Five. The first, termed 'traditional full hijab,' describes the dress of those who are religious and who have been practicing hijab very strictly as prescribed by the predominant Shia jurisprudence. The primary reason women veil in this manner is religious. This does not posit a religious realm distinct from the cultural, political or social. These are all entwined, but it is religion that comes to the fore in this case. Women dressed in full traditional hijab cover all parts of their body except their face and hands. They even cover some parts of their face, and they wear very long and loose clothes so that their figure does not show at all. They do not wear makeup in front of *namahram*.⁸ Women in this group are very strict and will not compromise the limits they believe in for any reason.

The second category is the 'full progressive hijab,' which refers to women who wear full hijab following mainstream Shia *fiqh* with a more modern style.⁹ They cover all

⁷ *Hadith*, in this thesis, refers to sayings and acts of the Prophet Mohammad and twelve Shia Imams.

⁸ *Namahram* are men who are not *mahram*. *Mahram* is a man who is allowed to see a woman without hijab. *Mahrams* include a woman's father, spouse, brother, son, father in law, grandfather, uncle, paternal uncle, nephew, and stepchildren.

⁹ *Fiqh* refers to jurisprudence, and means 'understanding' and 'knowledge'. *Fiqh* is the intellectual activity of trying to discover divine blueprints, bringing rules and legal systems out of the divine terms, and enforcing duties upon believers.

parts of their body except for their face and hands, but they wear more colourful clothes that are not necessarily very long or loose.

The third category is ‘partial-hijab,’ which refers to women who wear a headscarf but do not cover all parts of their hair and neck, and whose clothing does not follow the restrictions given by mainstream Shia *fiqh*.

The fourth scheme is ‘conservative scarf-less,’ which refers to women who believe in limiting their dress code but do not wear a headscarf. Their limits are much more open than the first three schemas, but they maintain some restrictions in what they wear.

The last scheme is ‘radical hijab-less,’ which refers to women who, at least in theory, do not believe in any religious limits in what they wear. In practice, they might or might not necessarily be comfortable wearing very revealing clothes.

It is important here to note that these categories are purely ideal typical and for heuristic purposes. They do not necessarily imply that there cannot be overlaps in some of these categories.

This project is evidently personal, as it relates to an issue that is part of my everyday life. Through auto-ethnography (Ellis, 2002, 1995; Goodall, 2006; Hooks, 2000) and discussion with diasporic Iranian Shia women resident in London who share similar or conflicting ideologies in this matter, as well as discussion with women who have undergone a transition in their dress code, I hope to divulge the multiple interpretations and dilemmas posed by the hijab and to identify the reasons for them. Along with auto-ethnography, my main methods are participant observation, semi-structured interviews, narratives, net-nography and focus groups.

Chapter outline

In Chapter Two, I review existing literature related to hijab and outline my research methods. The literature review engages with theoretical debates about Islam and modernity, a narrative and critique of colonial policies and Orientalist literature with specific focus on issues of women.

In Chapter Three, I describe the history of hijab policies and hijab jurisprudence from the constitutional revolution to the present providing a critical review and assessment of the major politic events which have contributed to the discourse on hijab in Iran. I conclude by talking about new juristic positions on hijab based on my interviews with four *mujtahids*¹⁰, and considering the effects of the history of hijab policy and hijab jurisprudence on the practice of hijab by Iranian women today. The views of all of these male scholars are reported critical with my own reflections within the thematic distinctions I make.

Chapter Four begins with a critical assessment of some of the literature about diapsoric Iranian communities in London and reconnects with the theme of secularism from chapter Two. I also look at communities and social spaces in London with religious functions and investigate some of the social, political and intellectual dynamics of these spaces in terms of their relation to dress code of Muslim Iranian women.

In Chapter Five, I provide detailed ethnographic description of hijab and the five categories of dress code amongst Iranian women in London in a critical manner. The categories are interwoven into the the assessment of each schema of hijab against the themes which draw on the theoretical question posed in chapter Two.

Chapter Six analyses the contextual factors of wearing hijab, including individual/personal, religio-cultural, jurisprudential, and socio-political. I explore causes and rationales for choosing each scheme of dress code and for transitioning from one scheme to another across individual life histories. Responses from informants are interrogated and assessed in light of critical assessment of the three themes of choice/agency, oppression vs. restriction and issues of secularity.

¹⁰ *Mujtahid* is an Islamic scholar who exercises *ijtihad* and is an expert in interpreting Islamic law. *Mujtahid* exercises *ijtihad* on the basis of Quran, Sunna, consensus (*ijma*) and reason (*aql*). The *muqallids*—that is, lay people who lack specialised religious knowledge—are expected to submit to the judgment of a *mujtahid* in religious disputes. In due course, a hierarchy of *mujtahids* has formed, at the top of which are the *marjas*. The *muqallids* decide which *marja'* to follow using a set of not clear-cut criteria.

The concluding chapter summarises the findings of the research in a broader narrative identifying the themes, questions that drive the research and some notes on the way forward.

Chapter Two: Literature Review, Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Introduction

In this chapter I review the relevant literature on Islam and modernity, Islam and gender, and hijab practice. I develop a multi-perspectival theoretical framework for my fieldwork to avoid reductive oversimplification. Subsequently, I discuss the main methods I have used in my research, my fieldwork procedure, the problems I faced, and the insights I developed. I approached my research with theoretical ideas and expectations that framed my approach and perspective, and I will therefore explore the effect of these expectations on my project.

Twelver Imami Shia Islam represents the largest of the surviving Shia sects and Iran is the only country in the world where hijab is compulsory for all women in all public spaces throughout the country. However, hijab amongst the Shia Iranians, the subject of my study, have hitherto received but scant attention, partly because of the difficulties and costs of empirically or ethnographically researching the subject of the study: hijab transitions amongst Iranian women. One could even argue that no subject is as sensitive as this in the eyes of the Iranian government and that few groups seem as inaccessible and closed to foreigners and non-Muslims as that of religious hijabi women.

Compulsory hijab in Iran and even voluntary practice of hijab exert a great deal of influence on the lives of the Iranian women worldwide. My thesis is an attempt to explore the factors that influence Iranian women's choice of hijab and its transitions. It will try to show how cultural, social and political factors interweave with theological and jurisprudential debates leading to diverse forms of practicing hijab and its transitions in one's life. To put it simply, my thesis aims at portraying and explaining the current status of, and developments in, hijab amongst Iranian women who have been raised in Iran and now live in London.

Theoretical and historical backgrounds of a tension

In my research, I investigate the connections between views of modernity and piety¹¹, focusing on hijab practice amongst Iranian Shia women in London. I asked women how they define being modern, and how modernity is compatible with their religious beliefs. In other words, I want to determine how they feel that piety, and public displays of piety, fit with life in a Western country. How do they understand the modern and the traditional? And what implications do being modern have for understanding the performance of women's piety in a diasporic context? These questions will be further explored in detail in subsequent ethnographic chapters. For now I address the existing literature that pertains to this subject. In what follows below, I have traced the historical and theoretical roots of some of these questions and how they pose challenges not only for women but also for academics.

Islam, Modernity and Secularism: Backgrounds of a Confrontation

The Muslim world in contemporary times is facing unprecedented challenges, which are primarily of a political nature but socially, economically and intellectually, Muslims face various kinds of challenges. The tragic events of 9/11 in the US and 7/7 in London gave a much stronger impetus to what was already in place with regard to 'Islam' and Muslims around the world and also in Western societies. The emergence of the ISIL and various offshoots of violent groups that operate under the name of 'Islam' has not only led to bloodshed and tragic events perpetrated by these groups but has also exacerbated the situation which existed before. A new turn of events has further enhanced the image of an 'Islam' which is seen contrary to rationality, freedom, human rights, democracy, and, in sum, values of the Western civilisation.

The debate about Islam, in almost every sphere, is replete with false and constructed binaries in which 'Islam' is portrayed by not just its detractors but also even by Muslims as the very embodiment of backwardness. It may be perhaps a little strong and over-reactive but there is certainly an element of truth in how Joseph Massad captures this dichotomy: one has to choose between either Islam or

¹¹ By piety, I mean religious devotion or spirituality.

liberalism (his focus is on liberalism here) and that “unless one is a barbarian, a despot, an irrational psychopath, a neurotic, a totalitarian, an intolerant brute, a misogynist, a homophone, in short a Muslim, the answer must be the latter” (Massad, 2015, p. 2). The underlying arguments for such perceptions are connected with how Edward Said forcefully deconstructed the Orientalist tradition in his ground-breaking work *Orientalism* (1978). The roots of the discourse which led to such binaries goes far back in history, as early as the first encounters of the Crusaders with Muslims, but there is a key concept which is closely interrelated with the perpetuation and genesis of this image: modernity.

It is particularly relevant to bring to the fore the context in which modernity came to be viewed as the categorical *other* to Oriental societies in general and to ‘Islam’ and Muslims in particular. Max Weber is particularly responsible for articulating the language which described modernity in a singularly European sense.

Modernity and all its values were seen by Max Weber as unique and peculiar to Occidental societies:

Only the Occident knows rational law, made by jurists and rationally interpreted and applied, and only in the Occident is found the concept of citizen... but a rational science and in connection with it a rational technology remained unknown to those civilizations. Finally, Western civilization is further distinguished from every other by the presence of men with a rational ethos for the conduct of life... Magic and religion are found everywhere; but a religious basis for conduct that, when consistently followed, had to lead to a specific form of rationalism is again peculiar to Western civilization alone (Weber 1961, pp. 232-3)

As we can see in Weber’s account, rationality is at the heart of his articulation but it is also closely related to how, according to him, Oriental societies engage with religion. Oriental societies have religion, magic, superstition and an enchanted world which is seen categorically at odds with the project of modernity that Weber described. For Weber, modernity is closely connected with the Christianisation of Europe and the rise of capitalism which he elaborates in the context of Protestant ethics. Weber did not have much time to extensively study Islam but his views,

however crude, did have a lasting influence not only on the European language of modernity but also, surprisingly on the way Muslim reformers engaged with problems of their own societies.

Weber's inadequacies with regard to Muslim societies and Islam have been extensively criticised but the potent ideas which led to the perpetuation of the binary of Muslims and Orientals as the *Other* remain in place and are even further sharpened in the context of contemporary events in the 21st century. Not only Weber's consistent and monolithic perception of modernity has been challenged among European scholars, but the peculiarity of 'Islam' has also been subject of heated debates and ferocious challenges, both by Muslims and non-Muslims. The fault line of these debates are around questions such as: Is Islam compatible with democracy? Is Islam compatible with human rights? Is Islam compatible with freedom of speech? And more closely relevant to the question of this thesis: is Islam compatible with women's rights? In all of these questions, the persisting theme is the uniqueness and the singularity of both Islam and every other category which is put forward for examination of whether it is compatible with Islam or not. All of these monolithic concepts have been powerfully deconstructed but they still remain in force and shape our world.

One of the solutions provided to the problem is through drawing attention to the diversity of interpretations in Islam and shifting the emphasis from 'Islam' as an abstract idea, open to multiple interpretations to Muslims as individual and collective agents who are the centre of such confrontations and engagements. Therefore, the question is not whether 'Islam' is compatible with democracy or not. It is rather a question of whether, how and under what circumstances Muslim people and communities could be open to democracy, modernity, secularity and a host of other concepts which are supposed to be universal.

The response to this latter category of questions provided a somewhat more conducive space to accommodate shifts and open a dialogue but there is still a persistent issue at the heart of the question: the very idea of compatibility. In effect, by replacing 'Islam' with Muslims, the question of agency is highlighted and

duly emphasised, but then a more pressing matter has remained central to the question: can Muslims be modern? The very presence of 'Muslim' as a category is a reproduction of the same position. The question is seldom asked if a Christian or a Jew can be modern. It is taken for granted that all other communities can be modern and indeed are modern. The sociology of the discussions which provides shades or modernity, even in European societies, remains peripheral to the debate. The core issue is that the Muslim and the Oriental – and 'Islam' – is irrelevant in the question.

It is particularly important to highlight the fact that such articulations of the question is not simply an Orientalist invention. Nor is it specifically the product of the rise of Islamophobia in Western societies. It is also a dominant theme in Muslim societies and even among some Muslim intellectuals and reformers. The epistemological foundations of the question remains trapped in the legacy of the reason of Enlightenment (Arkoun 2002, pp. 224-225). Those who have been critical of such reproductions have managed to shed further light on the inner workings of this complicated situation. What I intended to do here is to set the scene for engaging with the question. The purpose is not to point fingers or to place the blame squarely on European or Orientalist scholarship, political forces or media depictions of Muslims. The purpose is to understand the philosophical, epistemological and historical contexts in which such debates emerge. The reality is that the same discourse with an Orientalist bent to it keeps being reproduced and recycled in different forms to insist on the same solution which has consistently failed over the past two centuries. The old narrative of Occidental vs. Oriental is once again reproduced in a lesser form of Good Muslim vs. Bad Muslim. Mahmood Mamdani captures the inherent theme of this categorisation as 'Culture-Talk'. The problem is seen as in the 'culture' of these people which turns them into 'bad' Muslims. Mamdani puts the question in a different context:

Anybody who followed the public discussion in the US about good and bad Muslims soon realised that good and bad were not adjectives describing the attitude of Muslims to Islam. They were actually adjectives describing the attitudes of Muslims to the West. They were not cultural adjectives; they

were political adjectives. Simply put, a good Muslim was a pro-Western Muslim and a bad Muslim was an anti-Western Muslim (Mamdani in Goldewijk 2007, p. 154)

There is virtually no area, no concept, which is not connected with this culturalism that shapes the discourse on Islam and Muslims. More specifically, gender issues are part of the same debate. Issues of gender and of dress code are represented and debated in the same vein. Therefore, when it comes to the purported subjugation of women in Oriental societies, including Muslim ones, a cultural explanation is provided which makes Islam and Muslims specific, peculiar and exceptional. The argument suffers from an essentialism which claims that there is an 'essence' to 'Islam' and this essence is considered to be known to the Occident and the scholars who see the problem through this lens. Therefore, the Western civilisation is charged with the responsibility to rescue these Orientals and the Muslims from oppression. This oppression is not merely in the case of political establishments and regimes but also in the form of ideas and concepts. It is not just the governance system which needs to be democratised – often by exporting democracy at gunpoint – but also the people and more specifically women who need emancipation.

In a more specific context, in the aftermath of the 9/11, Abu-Lughod (2002) revisited the same question of cultural explanations and warned against the dangers of 'reifying culture'. Quoting Laura Bush – a woman herself – Abu-Lughod drew attention to how this desire to liberate and emancipate Muslim women was part of this cultural move. Laura Bush was connecting the 'military gains' of the US in Afghanistan with the liberation of women as a result of which "they can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment" (Abu-Lughod 2002). It is here the 'war on terror' is connected with the 'rights and dignity of women'. These words were reminiscent of not only an Orientalist approach but also of the colonial history which shapes the discourse on women's rights. Abu-Lughod also highlighted the generality of the questions posed in this regard: 'Do Muslim women believe X? Are Muslim women Y? Does Islam allow Z for women?' and she asks the same question I posed earlier: what happens if you replace Islam and

Muslims with Christianity, Judaism or any other subject? Would anyone ask those questions? And why or why not?

The answers to these questions are straightforward. Questions about those other than Muslims and Islam are rarely asked. The reasons are partly political and partly due to the dominant academic atmosphere that Edward Said had pointed out much earlier. It is interesting to see that even those critical of Edward Said who sometimes charged him for being too emotional and overzealous in attacking Orientalism, provided a similar diagnosis in a more benign language.

Mohammed Arkoun (in Nanji 1997) provides a more detailed analysis of the major strands of what he calls colonial sciences. He categorises these studies under philological studies and ethnographic studies. The former dealt with a meticulous and cumulative study, edition and publication of texts while the latter was closely connected with going into the field, living with and among the 'colonised' people. Arkoun reflects that in the study of religion, they described "the superstitions, magical beliefs and practices among the peoples of North Africa rather than Islam" (Arkoun in Nanji 1997, p. 35). As one can see, the Weberian leitmotifs of the colonial studies are sharply present in this narrative. He also notes that these studies "were dominated by the positivist definition of progress, rationalism, science and civilization, all of which were contrasted with the primitive mentality" (Arkoun in Nanji 1997, p.36). He continues to point out the colonialist ideology behind a "scientific" legitimation to the domination and conquering of African and Asian societies.

The background of this approach can be traced back to writers much earlier than Max Weber, though. As Massad (2015) points out, John Locke "excluded Islam, Judaism, Confucianism, among others, from reasonableness" when he was writing *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695). The question is, however, broader than a mere arrogance or hubris of a Christian writer against Muslims. As Stanley Fish has pointed out in a meticulous and challenging discussion on the limits of freedom of speech (Fish 1994), John Milton surprisingly excludes Catholics from having the right to free speech (Fish 1994, p. 103) in his *Areopagitica* (1644). The point I wish to draw attention to here is not simply the prejudice of one religious

or non-religious author against another group. It is more fundamental in the sense that both Locke and Milton are among the founding figures of what Western civilisation represents in terms of its values. Rationality and freedom of speech which are meant to be universal did not have such clear pronouncements in their original articulations: even the fiercely defended values of the Occidental civilisation were subject to contingencies which would make even a European citizen shudder at the thought of it. Therefore, it is not just about Muslims being targeted, nor is it simply about Islamophobia. It is the agency of individuals and communities denied regardless of their background, belief, gender or race. I will further discuss this point when it comes to feminism and the rights of women in Muslim countries which have directly or indirectly experienced colonialism or its effects.

Bearing in mind the background I discussed above, modernity has been defined in a variety of ways. Some commonly assumed characteristics are technological advancement, capitalism, secularization and disenchantment, consumerism, and the priority of individualism (Mitchell, 2000). Eurocentric approaches place the West at the centre of this universal notion of modernity. They posit that through colonialism modern ideas and institutions have spread to the rest of the world. This view has been challenged by scholars that advocate multiple modernities (Comaroff, 1993; Eisenstadt, 2003; Englund and Leach, 2000; Gaonkar, 1999), who argue that alternative modernities have emerged in other places, and who emphasise the different manifestations of modernity in different places (Hefner, 1998; Larkin, 1997). Englund and Leach point out that “current anthropological sensibilities have little patience for a discourse on modernity in the singular. Instead, a notion of multiple modernities appears plausible” (2000, p. 226).

The secularisation discourse links modernity with secularism. However, the increasing visibility of religion in the public sphere has challenged this view. From a Eurocentric perspective, Weber (1993 [first published in 1920]) believed that rationalisation is followed by secularisation¹². Some events and developments during the last four decades, such as the occurrence of the 1979 revolution in Iran,

¹² According to Weber, the ‘Protestant ethic’ enabled the rise of capitalism, whereas Catholicism did not.

the rise of New Religious Movements in different parts of the world in the last five decades, the growth in fundamentalist movements and religious parties in the Muslim world in the past four decades, the continued popularity of churchgoing in the United States in the 21st century, the unexpected appearance of New Age spirituality in Western Europe in the past five decades, the evangelical revival in Latin America in the last thirty years, and the upsurge of ethno-religious conflict in international affairs in the past three decades (especially in the Middle East), posed a serious threat to the universal validity of classical secularization theory (see e.g., Berger, 2001; Sherkat and Ellison, 1999). Some scholars, therefore, (e.g. Bruce, 2002; Chaves, 1994; Norris and Inglehart, 2011) tried to defend revised versions of classical secularization theory that came to be known as 'new secularization theory', while others (e.g. Antoun and Hegland, 1987; Bowen, 1993; Brenner, 1996; Casanova, 1994; Dorraj, 1999; Eickelman, 2000; Eickelman et al., 2004; Hefner, 1998; Meyer, 1999) have radically recanted this theory or substituted it with other ones.

The secularization theory clearly had a European bias, as I have demonstrated above. Therefore revisions were made in order to account for 'the American experience' (Hadden, 1987; Warner, 1994). Nevertheless, the secularization debate still suffered from a strong European Christianity bias. This led to a broadening of the focus of anthropological and sociological studies. However, even then, the bulk of empirically informed literature revolved around the typical Westerner. My study will attempt to push these boundaries further by examining the changes in the religious dress code of women that live in the West but after being raised in Iran, a country that has been regarded as an exception in most debates about the contemporary role of religion in people's lives.

Secularization has multiple meanings each of which needs separating out in order to avoid confusion. Since secularisation has been by far the most influential social theory on religion, any study of religion has to clarify its position for, or against, different dimensions of secularization theory. A well-known statement of secularization's multidimensionality has been put forward by Dobbelaere (1989, 1987, 1985, 1981). He suggests that secularization has three main dimensions that Chaves labels: laicization, internal secularization, and religious disinvolvement

(Chaves, 1994, p. 757). The first dimension, laicization, refers to the process of differentiation through which other institutions (e.g. political, educational, scientific, judicial, etc.) obtain autonomy from the religious institutions of a society. As a result of this process religion becomes one institutional sphere amongst others with no necessary authority over other institutional spheres.

As noted by Chaves,

The second dimension, internal secularization, is the process whereby religious organizations undergo internal development towards compatibility with the secular world. Religious disinvolvement, Dobbelaere's third dimension of secularization, is the decline of religious beliefs and practices amongst individuals. (Chaves, 1994: 757)

This third dimension is the one that is most relevant to my ethnographic study of hijab amongst Iranian women in London. Secularization at this individual level refers to the necessary decrease in the extent to which individual actions (dress code in the case of this study) are subject to religious control. My thesis will explore the empirical evidence that challenges the third dimension of secularisation theory.

My study, therefore, could be located under the umbrella of social theories that assume that, at least at the micro-level, religious authority will not necessarily decline in all cases and every society. My ethnographic study explores the evidence that show even amongst the educated professional Iranian women living in London, religious practices, including observing Islamic hijab, will not necessarily decline, even though 'religious change' is likely to happen, including in the manner in which women dress. My study, therefore, falls within the existing and growing literature in social sciences that look for 'changes' in religious beliefs and practices of citizens of modern societies (I will briefly mentioned citizenship in liberal societies when it comes to the discussion in diasporic communities), rather than necessarily a 'decline' in their religiosity.

A large body of literature on Islamism and modernity concerns the aforementioned alternative modernities, and criticises the idea that Islamism is a form of cultural resistance to Western modernity (e.g. Abu-Lughod 1998; Adelpah 1999; Al-Azmeh

& 'Azmah 1993; Bowen 1993; Höfert & Salvatore 2000; Mitchell 2000; Peletz 2002; Salvatore 2001; Tibi 1995; Watts 1996).

The concept of 'alternative modernities' has also been critiqued both for admitting that there is a single Western modernity for which other modernities are the alternative, and also for making the concept of modernity very particular, so that it neglects structural inequalities in the world (e.g. Gaonkar 2001; Knauf 2002; Rofel 1999; Piot 1999).

In discussing the relationship between Islam and modernity, and different approaches toward modernity, I found Deeb's (2006) work the most consistent theoretical framework available to serve the description and explanation of the topic of my research. However I problematize her assumption of the linear progress of modernity, and the alleged association between irrationality and tradition.

Deeb (2006) examines both the material and spiritual sides of modernity in her study of Shia women in Lebanon. By "material progress," she refers to modernisation in areas such as education, economy, and development in infrastructure and technology such as roads and computers. By "spiritual progress," she refers to increased public piety based on authenticated Islam. Authenticated Islam she defines as a modern interpretation of Islam founded on valid knowledge and understanding, as opposed to an Islam that is uncritical, unreflexive, and followed 'irrationally' by the older generation.

Deeb's understanding of modernity influences a part of the theoretical framework of my study. But I will incorporate in into a 'multiple modernities' framework' and will critique the way in which she reproduces the Eurocentric discourse of modernity through her linear conception of modernity. Her understanding of irrationality can also be critiqued because she does not provide a clear basis for dividing the rational and irrational and establishing whether or not Islam is compatible with modernity. I also challenge Deeb's delimitation of material modernity from spiritual modernity. The pious Shia women in Deeb's study see spiritual progress as an essential aspect of any feasible alternative to the perceived emptiness of modernity as manifest in the West. This spiritual progress is seen as

an attempt to escape from tradition into a new kind of religiosity and related commitments. Deeb argues that religion and politics are inseparable, but this does not mean that Islam is only in service of politics or Islam solely determines politics. It means that we cannot put religion or politics into discrete categories. She also highlights that, although spiritual and material modernities draw on different discourses, they are also parallel. That is, rather than interpreting Islamism as inevitably involved in a struggle with modernity, we can instead see spiritual progress as one of the potentials of various modernities.

In working on this concept, it is important to investigate not only local understandings of being modern, but also how these understandings are used in different temporal and spatial contexts, and how these uses relate to the global and transnational discourses about varieties of modernity. My aim is to investigate the different interpretations, experiences, and understandings people have about varieties of modernity in their daily life. Not much has been written about how Muslims themselves understand and think about being modern in a vernacular sense, separate from the theoretical links between modernity and the West. To investigate this theme, it is useful to ask the following questions: how are theoretical formulations of varieties of modernity related to personal and collective understandings of being modern? Without supposing that modernity has a single trajectory, how do individuals define being modern, and what do they desire for themselves and their community?

Gender and Islam

There is a wide range of literature available on gender and Islam. During the past two decades, concern has shifted from the topic of women in Islam to a broader Islamic framework of gender ideas, roles and relations (e.g. Abu-Lughod 1998; Kapchan 1996; Baron 1997; Najmabadi 1990; Najmabadi 2005; Haeri 1989; Moghadam 2003; Mahmood 2004; Afshar 1999; Al-Ali 2000; Mir-Hosseini 2000; Badran 1996). These studies challenge the assumption that Islam is the main influencing factor in gender constructs, and offer important insights how Muslim women define their religious and sexual identity. A growing number of studies have explored the tensions between Islam and feminism (Afshar, 1999; Badran, 1996;

Mahmood, 2004, 2001; Mir-Hosseini, 2000a; Moghissi, 1991; Poya, 1999). In what follows below, I have engaged more critically with some of the key aspects of these debates.

Muslim Women as Free Agents

One of the fundamental backbones of the current state of affairs is how 'Islam' is viewed through an essentialist, singular, monolithic and peculiaristic lens. Bayat (2007) argues that by referring to the 'Islamic society' or the 'Islamic world' in singular abstract forms, a generality is constructed which fails to see the nuances and also ignores the agency of Muslims. He proposes that the emphasis should not be on Islam but "on Muslims as agents of their societies and cultures, even if not of their own making" (Bayat 2007, p. 2). Bayat argues further, as I also proposed above, that "The question is not whether Islam is or is not compatible with democracy or, by extension, modernity, but rather under what conditions Muslims can make them compatible" (Bayat 2007, p. 4). This emphasis on the agency of Muslims is central to how I move forward with my research.

Exercise of agency, or lack thereof, among Muslim women, particularly when it comes to the issue of hijab is central for making sense of the shifts which have taken place. During the course of my research, newer dimensions of the issue became apparent which I had not envisaged earlier given the history and the background from which I was engaging with the issue. At a descriptive level, what I had initially observed was a visible shift in the practice of hijab among Iranian women living in London. The more fundamental issue was how, under what circumstances and why the practice had changed. Problematising the shift and the transformation of attitudes is critical to this research.

There are a number of interrelated themes which are at the heart of the problems identified and addressed here. The first is the issue of viewing hijab as either oppression or protection. The larger framework in which the issue has been and still continues to be addressed is aligned with this binary category (as we will clearly see in the way Shariati and Motahari engaged with the issue). The second theme is the issue of choice: have women adopted or relinquished the practice of

hijab by their own volition and as a result of conscious choice representing their agency? The third issue is how a Muslim woman in London can come to terms with and negotiate being a Muslim with being modern, without necessarily having to compromise what they deem as integral to their faith.

I will briefly address some of the literature and theoretical aspects of each of the above here. In the forthcoming chapters, when it comes to interviews with the male figures and with the female interviewees, I will interrogate the discourse further to demonstrate how these issues have received little attention or have been poorly problematized.

Abu-Lughod's initial response to the dichotomy of rescuing women from oppression in her 2002 article was later fully developed in a book with the same title published in 2013. Haleh Afshar (2008) further summarised the tension in the context of European crises in the aftermath of 9/11 and 7/7. She brings into sharper focus the process of otherizing Muslims (and Muslim women) by referring to Edward Said's analysis of Orientalism and then gives the perspective of Islamophobia by giving examples from the French context after the Paris riots in November 2005 and the strong reactions in the UK to Muslim women and association of terms such as terrorism and enslavement. She points out the irony that "despite the myth of white slavery, enslavement has been a very specific feature of North American economic development" (2008, p. 415). Even though she is rather mild in the way she goes about deconstructing such perceptions (compared with writer such as Said and Massad), she challenges the very foundation of Muslim women being seen as 'oppressed' or 'enslaved', which is what Abu-Lughod so vividly captures in the language of Laura Bush and Cherie Blair.

Afshar also highlights the approaches of Muslim women to revisiting and reinterpreting the Muslim scriptures with regard to their rights. She refers to the active role of women in challenging the situation:

Muslim women have focused on several areas of contestation ranging from the well-known and for many as yet unresolved discussions about the veil... to practicalities of wrenching power and authority away from men in the domains of politics and law and claiming agency in the domestic sphere. (Afshar 2008, p. 423)

In conclusion, she points out that branding Muslim women as “submissive, oppressed or subjugated” (p. 424) is uninformed and that women from ethnic minorities (referring to the British society) including veiled women “have more in common with their ‘white’ British-Muslim sisters than their male cradle-Muslim brethren” (ibid). In this article, Afshar addresses the first two of the categories I highlighted above, namely the idea of oppression and women’s choice and agency. She does not elaborate in further details issues of engaging with modernity and secularism except in her remarks about Orientalism which is very brief and does not provide too much detail about the theoretical aspects of it.

Going back to the themes I have highlighted, there are few works which have managed to capture all of these points in detail. Sahar Amer’s work (2014) is among works which have a much wider historical and contextual dimension. She gives a rather detailed history of the practice of veil before the rise of Islam and outside Islamic communities before, during and after the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad. At the very beginning of her work, she draws attention to the fact that Islam actually ‘inherited’ the practice from “major empires and societies of the time along with many other customs and patriarchal traditions related to the status of women” (Amer 2014, p. 1). Thus, she demonstrates that the view of hijab having exclusively ‘Islamic’ provenance is simply a myth and based on misinformation. The corollary of her opening remark is that it deprives the practice of hijab of a divine and sacred aspect. If we accept that other communities and societies, including non-monotheistic ones, practiced hijab, as part of a wider patriarchal hierarchy, then the next step is to accept a more ‘secular’ aspect to the veil.

The questions she puts forward in framing the contents of her book paves the way for engaging with the problem which cuts across all the literature produced about Muslim women:

Why do many people believe that veiled Muslim women are oppressed, ignorant, extremely pious, or politically militant? Why not view Muslim women in neutral terms, as women who choose or just happen to wear a headscarf? How did this piece of clothing become so emotionally and politically charged for both Muslims and non- Muslims? (Amer 2014, p. 2)

Amer proceeds by demonstrating that veiling is not simply descriptive or neutral, in effect demanding that veiling should be seen in more neutral terms rather than in politically charged depictions. She reflects on the judgmental dimension of views about veil, and its connection with the war on terror, which is resonant with how Abu-Lughod challenges these notions:

It is also a judgmental term, especially when associated with Islam. Muslim veiling is a notion that often evokes fear, anxiety, and a rising sense of threat, particularly in the aftermath of 9/11, the onset of the war in Afghanistan, and the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. (Amer 2014, p. 2)

This point reconnects both the role of colonial and imperialistic political campaigns with the issue, which is deeply rooted in the Orientalism that Said critiqued and the perception of rescuing women from subordination and subjugation. She proceeds to suggest that “the veil’s appearance in most public spaces has been taken as proof that Islam is quintessentially opposed to women’s rights. The veil has even come to stand in for the ultimate otherness and inferiority of Islam” (Amer 2014, p. 3). This is an issue which is, of course, not a product of recent developments and political shifts in the 21st century, but as I will shortly elaborate on, it is rooted in highly prejudiced and ill-informed view which was promoted by colonial officers and their native counterparts in Muslim countries (a case in point is Qasim Amin in Egypt to whom I will return). The inferiority and

otherness of 'Islam', which is also connected with the inferiority of Muslim women in cases, becomes part and parcel of the literature produced in the colonial mode. One of the interesting and most intriguing aspects of Amer's work is her meticulous engagement with the text of the Quran. In the first chapter of her work (pp. 21-37), she digs much deeper into the primary literature on Quranic studies and the Islamic traditions. Through these reflections, she problematizes the dominant notions about hijab among Muslims and non-Muslims.

Regarding the theme of choice, Amer's reflections open up a path for further engaging the agency of Muslim women. She challenges the idea of choice is simply being depicted in individualistic and liberal terms of Western societies. She posits that:

It can also imply allegiance to a larger community. In societies that emphasize group allegiance over individualism (and this is the case in many Muslim- majority societies), choice is not about doing what one wants, independently of the group, but about adopting what is best for the group. Affiliating oneself with the community is not considered a coercive imposition but rather a rational, voluntarily chosen act of morality. (Amer 2014, p. 65)

She describes choice in the sense that "some Muslim women choose to follow what their family, friends, or community do and that they would feel out of place if they acted differently" (Amer, 2014, p. 66). This approach challenges the idea of a woman wearing or not wearing the hijab by choice and moves away from a black and white attribution of choice to either. She puts the issue of choice in the context of a sense of belonging: "These women do not experience the adoption of their family's traditions or wishes as coercion or compulsion, but rather as their way of asserting their sense of belonging and of claiming their place within the community" (ibid).

Interrogating the contemporary setting and the case of Muslim women in Europe, Heidi Safia Mirza (in Gross et al 2013) addresses the issue of veil and

Islamophobia. Her article addressed the case of three professional Muslim women in Britain who are faced with challenges of the new conditions. Mirza places the banning of the veil in European settings under scrutiny and points out that:

It is ironic that such 'secular' banning of the headscarf in the name of equality and non-discrimination in a democratic societies runs parallel to the actions of Islamic fundamentalist countries such as Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia and Iran which force women to wear religious clothing. (2013, p. 304)

Thus, she reflects how 'secular' societies and states indeed become mirror images of repressive ones they claim to be critical of. Through describing examples of gendered Islamophobia in Europe, she argues that "parallels can be drawn to colonial times where women's bodies were part of the debate over the West's civilising mission" (ibid), which is in resonance with the attitudes criticised by Said and others.

Mirza reminds us of how the Muslim woman's body has turned into a battleground for ideological forces on both ends of the spectrum but also how it has become integral to this confrontation with Islam in the policies of European states: "the Muslim woman's vulnerable yet overdetermined body has become symbolic in the battle against Islam, the barbaric 'other' and the Muslim enemy 'within'" (2013, p. 305). She then reiterates the point that Amer (2014) has also highlighted differently by saying that a Muslim woman's "complex dress has been given symbolic meaning greater than its religious and social status" (ibid). This overstretching of the meaning of a dress code and pushing it further away from what could be or should be viewed in a more neutral sense has indeed paved the ground for this ideological battle.

She further elaborates on a point that Afshar (2008) has also pointed out with regard to European societies:

The Muslim women's private faith-based reasons for wearing the *niqab* have become public property, a 'weapon' used by many different competing interests, from male politicians in France to white feminists in Belgium to argue their cases for and against assimilation, multiculturalism, secularism and human rights. (ibid)

As we can see, here, the same notion of peculiarity, exceptionality and uniqueness is repeated all over again, this time with emphasis on Muslim women. A Muslim woman's dress code becomes the subject of public interest and even public safety. Mirza then draws on the resistance of Muslim feminists against constructions which defy the agency of Muslim women: "Islamic feminists have taken issue with the cultural superiority of simplistic, sensationalised cultural constructions of Muslim women in the media, constructions that negate Muslim female identity and agency, and depoliticise their (embodied) struggles for self-determination" (ibid). It is noteworthy that when Mirza quotes from Haideh Moghisi in relation to "the control of women and the authority of the patriarchal family", which she finds central to the "Islamic fundamentalist utopia", she compares it with the "rise of Western capitalism", bringing Max Weber and his articulation of the rationality of Western civilisation, which I mentioned earlier on. Quoting from Saba Mahmood, she concurs with her that "we must move beyond Western imperialist notions of liberatory emancipation, and the deterministic binaries of resistance/subordination by which Muslim female subjectivity and agency are so often judged in the 'West'". Thus, she is also challenging the binary of oppression vs. protection as viewed by the West.

On the theme of choice and agency, Mirza refers to a study by Open Society Foundation (in 2011) which:

...shows that contrary to the usual stereotype of Muslim women forced to wear the face veil, the adoption of the veil was in most cases about 'transforming the self'. It was the result of a personal and extremely individualistic spiritual journey in which most of the women were the first members of their family to adopt the veil and had no niqab-wearing peers,

and their attendance at their mosque or affiliation to any Islamic bodies was minimal. (p. 308)

Her description of adoption of the veil as ‘transforming the self’ is in line with how Amer describes a different sense of choice with the only difference that attendance in mosques or Islamic bodies seems peripheral and irrelevant in this exercise of choice. She, thus, criticises the idea that Muslim women have been seen as “as a homogenous group, oppressed and lacking agency” (p. 313). She is critical of how the veil has become a signifier of Islam and an ‘identity site’ “where British and European societies feel free to openly contest the Muslim women’s religious identity” (ibid). She views the “negating discourse of multiculturalism and virulent discourses of Islamophobia” as the context in which “that the women search for multiple and shifting identities” (ibid).

Mirza’s reflections are important in the way I look at Iranian Muslim women in London, as it covers the overall sociological and political ground in which the above-mentioned forces (Islamophobia, colonial legacy and Orientalist literature) operate and condition the exercise of agency for the women I have interviewed.

Problematizing Gender

The categories of male and female are not self-evident, and involve other aspects of life beyond gender relations and roles (Butler, 1999; MacCormack and Strathern, 1980; Moore, 1989; Torab, 2006). Marilyn Strathern (1990) shows that gender, in a metaphorical way, encompasses many aspects of life, including gender identity and its roles and relations. In this sense, gender is produced through people’s activities in everyday life: for example, in this case by wearing hijab.

The status of women and gender relations have been treated as a measure of modernity in several academic works (Abu-Lughod, 1998; Ahmed, 1992; Gole, 1997; Haddad and Esposito, 1997). Nadia Hijab (1988), for example, argues that Western notions of liberty and emancipation are a universal way to measure women’s status. However, this view derives from a specific (Eurocentric) understanding of modernity.

Mahmood (2001) critiques the assumption that women universally desire women's liberation, and that this is a useful measure for modernity and female status. Abu-Lughod (1998) argues that the pious modern (or a practicing spiritual modern religious) individual is not in complete opposition to the Western idea of the modern women. The status of women cannot simply be defined by Western ideas of emancipation. In my research I expand on the relation between being pious and modern, problematizing and questioning the possibility of distinguishing between Western women and Muslim hijabi women.

Following Thomas Csordas' (1990) argument, the paradigm of *embodiment* in studying hijab highlights the importance of the body. Embodiment is about how we study perception where the distinction between the subject and object is eroded. In Csordas' view, it is not appropriate to differentiate between mind and body on the level of perception, because when we talk about the body in an experiential way as a subject and not an object, the mind-body distinction is eroded. Bodies are not objects to us. They are a part of the perceiving subject (Campbell, 2011 :15). Therefore, the body is a starting point for analysing culture and the self. Csordas argues that the dualities of mind-body, self-other, cognition-emotion, and subjectivity-objectivity should be treated in parallel to the dissolution of the subject-object.

Embodiment is a useful tool for understanding the practice of veiling. For many women, hijab becomes a part of their self-perception. The object becomes fused with the subject. To put it more simply, for some hijabis, hijab becomes an extension of the body and part of their self. This, however, is not always the case, and even when it is the case, it is not always the most important element of one's body and self-image and identity. In other words, hijab is not necessarily the most important component of what a hijabi woman is. By concentrating on women's narratives, including my own interactions with them, I aim to break down the objectification of Muslim women's bodies, which the dominant Western discourse reduces to the hijab. At the same time, I criticise Islamic jurisprudence that reduces all situations to one single interpretation and obliges women to follow a prescribed dress code at all times and in all places. This can also be seen as a way of objectifying women's

bodies. The state and effect of Islamic Shia Jurisprudence will be explored in Chapter Three.

A key question about gender relations is how the Shia women of my study understand and interpret the interconnection between the hijab, gender roles, and their own perceptions of gender. Concomitantly, I examine Shia Islamic jurisprudence and its rules about gender issues to see how it has influenced these issues. I investigate how these rules are translated, transformed, and reproduced in everyday lives, particularly through my focus on hijab and the way Shia women perceive and practice it.

Hijab

There is a wide range of literature on hijab and veiling from different perspectives. Hijab has been an important issue of struggle between traditionalists and modernists in the past centuries. It has been an index to gauge the emancipation or repression of women. On the one hand, early Iranian feminists, in line with modernist views, assumed that hijab was a form of female confinement (see Naghibi 1999). On the other hand, a growing number of scholars argue that claims about the subjugation and repression of hijabi Muslim women have been overstated (see Ahmed 1993; Guindi 1999; Mahmood 2004; Sandikci & Ger 2005; Mir-Hosseini 2007; Alvi et al. 2003; Bowen 2008; Shirazi 2003).

Demystifying the veil

I have briefly discussed above and referred to the literature which highlight how Muslims and Islam is seen as unique, peculiar or exceptional. Here, I would like to be more specific about how this notion is generalised and taken to a new level when it comes to dress code. Eirini-Chrysovalantou Zempi's PhD thesis (2014) has provided some critical insights into this topic. In the first chapter of her work, she speaks about "the failure to acknowledge the possibility of the autonomy of veiled Muslim women" (Zempi 2014, p. 13) which paves the way for depicting Muslim women as 'voiceless victims' reinforcing the idea of emancipation and liberation.

Zempi further argues that “dominant perceptions about veiled Muslim women’s lack of agency further entrench dangerous notions of a ‘Muslim problem’ whereby Muslim men deny Muslim women the freedom to exercise their autonomy” (ibid). Therefore, it is not simply about denying the agency of the Muslim women, who is seen as the oppressed voiceless victim, but also about viewing it as a ‘problem’. Zempi draws our attention to the British context and how the policy of multiculturalism has contributed to aggravate the issue:

In the British context, national identity and examples of Muslim ‘difference’ are cast as mutually exclusive. As such, the veil is rejected on the grounds that it is non-British in inception and adoption, thereby erasing the principle of integration as a two-way process of mutual accommodation by all; rather, it is integration at the price of becoming less ‘Muslim’ (Zempi 2014, p. 17)

She continues to give us a narrative of how the dress code of Muslim women is singled out as peculiar and as something which cannot be compared with other forms of dress code, such as the turban or a yarmulke or even a baseball cap. Thus, the veil is seen as different from other forms of ‘religious’ dress code (ibid). She notes that:

...the wearing of the veil signals a visibility that is ‘conspicuous’ in comparison to other religious signs, which themselves do not attract public attention and, though also visible, remain ‘normalised’. As such, the veil is ‘unique’ on the basis that it prevents a basic form of human contact in a way that the Muslim headscarf, the Sikh turban, the Buddhist robe and the Christian Cross do not. (Zempi 2014, pp. 17-18)

As we can see, the veil is thus singled out and it becomes a unique area of contention to which all Muslim women are drawn. In this sense, the rhetoric itself acts as a disempowering force which deprives Muslim women of any agency: the fate and the role of a dress code, which could for all intents and purposes be seen as neutral and on the same level as any other dress code – including those attached

to religions – is tied to a mystified and highly politicised notion. Therefore, Muslim women, their attire, their body, their sexuality and every aspect of their life is turned into an area of contention. Moreover, they are also victimised on the same grounds and as Zempi notes: “Muslim women are viewed as the main vehicles of integration but simultaneously they are the first victims of the failure of integration. Ironically, choosing to veil is a greater offence than being forced to veil” (2014, p. 19).

Therefore, what happens here is that Muslim women are depicted as oppressed ones who need rescue. Then, they are deprived of agency and choice by how their dress code is politicised, not in repressive Muslim countries but in liberal and secular societies. And all of this happens in the name of modernity, secularism and values of a liberal society. The entire scenario reinforces a sharp separation and segregation of ‘us’ and ‘them’ which otherises Muslim women who happen to be subjects of male-dominated patriarchal forces in a different context.

The literature I have covered so far provide a more coherent theoretical framework to engage with the issues of Iranian Muslim women in London and also interrogate the conditions which have led to transformations in their dress code. As I will discuss in the forthcoming chapters too, this is not to focus on either Islamophobia or victimisation of Muslim women who wear the veil. The diasporic conditions give a different perspective to the issue and the policies of the Islamic Republic with regard to hijab place the issue in a different context even though parallels may be drawn with the literature I have just discussed.

On this note, I would like to touch upon Islamic feminism in this context and provide a background of how this new and emerging discourse has contributed directly or indirectly to the situation of Iranian women in general and that of Iranian women in London.

Islamic Feminism or Islam and Feminism?

The struggle for women's rights among Muslims has been influenced by the encounter of Muslims with modernity. Therefore, inevitably, all the debates about Islam and modernity, secularism, democracy are on one way or another part of this debate. Badran (2009) provides a narrative about how feminism in Islam was viewed in the West and also by Muslims themselves. In the case of the former, not Islamic feminism itself but also the very association of feminism and Islam, according to Badran, was presumed an oxymoron (Badran 2009, p. 1). On the other end of the spectrum, in "the East" it was viewed as an anathema. Badran immediately notes, however, that the concern for "oppressed Muslim woman" was used as an instrument for justifying colonial policies as part of an Orientalist discourse (ibid). She further reflects that denigrating Islam has also been part of the process:

...We note that Westerners attack Muslims by belittling the very notion that they could generate a feminism of their own, and in so doing denigrate Islam as inherently gender-unjust, while many Muslims (playing into their hands) attack the West for foisting feminism upon their hapless coreligionists, wantonly discrediting Muslim women's feminisms. (Badran 2009, pp. 1-2)

Thus, she reinforces the point about the deep-rooted antagonism which was often the product of ignorance about Islam and Muslim societies. According to Badran, what is called or viewed as feminism developed and constructed by Muslim women is not a derivation or an appropriation of a Western idea; religion has been part and parcel of the construction of the idea of feminism, whether it is secular feminism or Islamic feminism. She contrasts this point with how feminism in the West was developed as a "largely secular enterprise" articulated outside the domain of religion and its language (Badran 2009, p.2).

Badran's observation about secular and Islamic feminism in Muslim countries is valuable in the sense that she does not compartmentalise the two and establishes an organic connection between them: those working in either framework did not

operate in total seclusion and isolation from one another.

Nonetheless, she clearly depicts their differences too. On secular feminism, she notes: "Secular feminism signified a model of feminism located within the context of a secular territorial nation-state composed of equal citizens, irrespective of religious affiliation and a state protective of religion while not officially organized around religion" (Badran 2009 p. 3). It is important to note how secular feminism is constructed or viewed in the context of territorial nation-state. It is reminiscent of Weberian concepts all along. If we remember how Weber is responsible for arguing about the uniqueness of Occidental civilisation and modernity, we cannot fail to notice the connection here. What is significant, however, is that these connections are not fully problematized in the way Badran engages with the issue. She gives a broader description in her other work (in Kynsilehto 2008):

Feminism as a phenomenon engaging with issues of women's rights, women's liberation, and gender equality as part and parcel of the rights, liberation, and equality of all was constructed and shaped concurrently by Muslims and others in the East... and by westerners in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (p. 25)

In her 2009 work, she is more specific. She further provides her description of Islamic feminism in the following terms: "Islamic feminism, by contrast, burst on the global scene as a new discourse or interpretation of Islam and gender grounded in *ijtihad*, or independent intellectual investigation of the Qur'an and other religious texts" (ibid). The description captures the core elements of Islamic feminism in a succinct manner. The only area which remains vague in this description (and Badran explains it further in a different way) is the role of authority. It is implicit in Badran's definition that women themselves have a role in interpretation and *ijtihad* but the greater bulk of knowledge production and interpretations in the Muslim world, including on women's issues, have remained in the hands of male scholars or *mujtahids*.

What becomes apparent in Badran's engagement with the issue (and we have also

seen this in the more meticulous work of Amer in referencing Quranic verses and the *hadiths*) is that a space is being created and as Afshar noted (2008), “wrenching power and authority away from men” is inevitably part of this process. The key is, however, the education of women. It is this point which is critical in understanding how the issue of veil, in particular, was viewed regarding the education of women, in a range of discourses.

Highlighting the role of Islamic feminists and women exegetes, Badran notes that they provide “compelling arguments that the patriarchal model of the family does not conform to the Qur’anic principles of human equality and gender justice” (Badran 2009, p. 4) and as a consequence, this engagement with the Qur’an, “brought them into the universe of holistic egalitarian Islam encompassing the intersection of family and society that constitutes the *umma*” (ibid). Badran captures a fundamental issue in the right tone, but what is missing here is the process through which this authority is shifted from its male guardians to women, as those who struggle for the rights of women. One of the areas of contention is this process. Many of the tensions which have occurred over the body of women and their dress code results from this sense of authority which is assumed to be a monopoly of men. I will return to this point shortly when it comes to the case of Egypt and Qasim Amin.

Before proceeding further, I must explain why I have frequently noted the case of Egypt in this section while my own research focussed on Iran and Iranian women in London. The relevance is that of discourse and the methodological issues at stake. Egypt is a uniquely interesting case as it has the experience of colonisation – unlike Iran which was never directly colonised – and one can visibly see the role of Orientalism and colonial policies and their modes of knowledge production there. The themes and ideas related to women’s issues are vividly related to how we articulate the same questions for Iranian women inside and outside Iran. Badran correctly places the rise of secular feminist movements in various Muslim countries to national aspirations. Thus, moving away from the concept of the universal community of Muslims (*umma*) to a national setting, which is viewed in secular terms, is a critical reference point for secular feminists among Muslims. By

providing the above narrative, she indeed surpasses some of the limitations of separating secular and Islamic feminists. She argues that such categorisations are “rigid, reductive, or misleading, and frequently have been deliberately manipulated for political ends” (Badran 2009, p. 5).

What Badran refers to as “religious women” (the *mutadayyināt*) broadly covers those who looked to the Qur’an to find answers of their own regarding the issues of women:

They were impelled to critique the resurgence of a gender-reactionary Islam that threatened the gains women had made but recoiled from the word “feminism” because of the associations it held for them, seeing it as “Western”; yet they had difficulty in coming up with an alternative term. (Badran 2009, p. 9)

In my research, the interviewees may broadly fall into this category with the only difference that the definition of a “religious woman” is broadened when it comes to the issue of veil. I will speak about this further when I come to the typologies that I identify, but here, it is important to note that Badran does not go into specific details of who would be a religious woman. Is it someone who refers to the Qur’an as a source of authority and then extracts and interprets verses to accommodate the life of women in their times? Is it about how the agency of these women can reflect itself in the entirety of their ritual practices? Is it about how the practice of religious rituals can be connected to the practice of the veil? These questions fall beyond or outside the work of Badran but they are important and integral to my research and I will elaborate on them in later chapters.

Referring to the case of Iran, Badran observes that in other countries, those who engaged with the Qur’an did not consider their work as feminist but the situation in Iran is different:

A striking early exception were the new religious intellectuals - women and men -scholars, writers, and journalists in Iran who were explicit about the

feminist dimension of their work, and indeed played a seminal role in the development of the new Islamic feminism as their ideas circulated globally. It was Muslim secular feminists as writers and scholars in various locations who recognized, in the new *ijtihad*, the emergence among coreligionists of a “feminism in a new voice” and coined the term “Islamic feminism” (Badran 2009, p. 9)

In the context of Egypt, Badran points out the movement for the education of women by feminists activists but she also notes:

They wanted women to gain more education and to reclaim public space before they unveiled, as a tactical move. While for progressive men unveiling had a key ideological and symbolic value, for women it was a practical matter that they themselves would have to undertake, with the attendant risks of taunts and assaults on their reputations (Badran 2009, p. 22)

The emphasis on women’s education by men had an entirely different background and ideological charge behind it which was closely connected with colonial policies in the late 19th century in Egypt. Nonetheless, as I noted earlier, the education of women as also connected with their dress code and how it was seen in the society. Giving the political context of the late 1970s in Egypt, a new element is now added to the engagement of Muslim feminists and that is the introduction of Islamic law into the law of the land:

The year 1979 was highly charged for Egypt, abroad as well as at home. Egypt ratified the Camp David accord with Israel, isolating itself from the Arab world and alienating both leftists and conservatives at home. The decrees favorable to women within the family and in parliament provoked Muslim conservatives. Meanwhile, the revolution in Iran brought Khomeini to power, ushering in a new Islamic state and heartening fundamentalists in Egypt. As Islamist forces gathered momentum, the Egyptian state made an important placatory move to Islamists and religious conservative in 1980

when it amended the constitution to read: “Islamic jurisprudence is the principal source of legislation,” replacing the 1971 formulation that “the shari’ah is a principal source of law.” (Badran 2009, p. 43)

While in Egypt the idea of Islamic feminism was not a totally new concept, the Islamic Revolution in Iran brought a new phase and dimension to feminism in Iran. The introduction of Islamic laws in the Iranian constitution did indeed intensify the momentum of Islamic feminism. It is important to note that Islamic feminism in Iran was not intended to be approving of the legal frameworks which were mainly man-made and male-driven. We must also note that even though female *mujtahids* do exist in Iran and they have their own circles, they are not – and have not been – so visible or influential in determining the course of policies for women’s rights when we view the situation from the lens of religious authority.

In the second chapter of her book, Badran focusses on Qasim Amin and the rise of feminism in Egypt and in the very opening paragraphs, she addresses a question which is critical and interrelated to how she problematizes the issue of secular/Islamic feminism. She asks: “where do we situate the “woman question”? Within a secular or religious discourse? Or within a more inclusive discourse that renders such categories simplistic and misleading?” (Badran 2009, p. 55). The inclusive framework that she is referring to is one that can go beyond such binaries or categorisations to enable to end result of these struggles for working more collaboratively. This approach is in resonance with how Amer (2014) seeks a more neutral way of addressing the issue of veil rather than turning it into an area of contention where ideological forces can battle over.

Badran notes the removal of the monopoly of religious institutions over education (in general): “Education had been moving away from the more exclusive control of the religious establishment, fanning out from al-Azhar to that of secular authorities (of both the state and civil society) (Badran 2009, p. 55). This “secularisation” of education did indeed provide space for all, including women, to empower themselves. At the centre of these struggles is Qasim Amin, who is depicted as the “father of Arab feminism”. Badran argues that “the evolving feminist discourse of

women and of Amin emerged in the context of Islamic reform and secular nationalism" (p. 56). While she may be correct about Amin and secular nationalism, her claim about Amin and Islamic reform needs to be seriously assessed. While throughout this work and in other places, Badran is more sympathetic to Amin and his project for the emancipation of women, others such as Leila Ahmed have severely criticised Amin for his writings (which I will describe here shortly after discussing Badran). More specifically, there is a risk of equating Amin with Islamic reformists such as Muhammad 'Abduh who is assumed to have contributed to a part of Amin's arguments.

That being said, Badran does not ignore that harsh language of Amin when he spoke about Egyptian Muslim women. In contrast, she does notice the more gentle language of women when they spoke to each other: "In speaking to each other, women were gentle and compassionate. They had an agenda for change which they expressed in a forceful and confident voice. They also articulated what may be called a discourse of suffering" (p. 56) and she proceeds by saying that:

Amin in his narrative style and modes of argumentation appeals to men, to what they- and the family and nation - will gain if women achieve their liberation. He describes women - women's condition and practices - in often offensive and crude ways, as women would not do, and as some later took offense to. (Badran 2009, p. 57)

What Badran describes as "offensive and crude" lacks a more critical analysis, unlike the way Ahmed had done before her. While speaking about the background of Amin as a judge and comparing him with feminist women, Badran notes his education – which is deeply influenced by a French mentality:

Amin had trained at the French School of Law and Administration in Cairo, and went on to study law in Montpellier for four years. Taimuriyya, Fawwaz, Naufal, and Sha'rawi were all schooled by private tutors at home. Amin was a judge when he wrote *Tahrir al-mar'a*, and as such an important public figure of the establishment, while the women were all leading

discreetly secluded lives (ibid).

Here, Badran fails to make the connection between Amin's harsh and disparaging language with a background of French Orientalist and colonial influence here, even though in a different work, she notes that "until today feminism remains in many ways a prisoner of colonialism" (Badran in Kynsilehto 2008, p. 25). Indeed, this point, as we can see in the work of Ahmed, is a central and important point in the reactions we see to Amin's work. Nonetheless, Badran points out a different aspect about Amin and these feminists which has to do with their privileged status:

Qasim Amin and the women mentioned here all had foreign ancestry: Amin came from a Kurdish family originating from Iraq; Taimuriyya was of Turco-Circassian lineage; Fawwaz and Naufal originated from Lebanon; Sha'rawi, the only one with an Egyptian parent (her father), had a Circassian mother. Their non-Egyptian origins and connections did not place them on the margins, but rather conferred status, while also providing more than one optic on life. (p. 57)

The privileged status of these people based on ancestry – or at least partly based on that – does not precisely serve as a liberating background for their endeavours. Indeed, this aspect when viewed from a purely critical and intellectual perspective, should be peripheral, but it seems that indeed it does work. The fact that this status is important is not merely part of the description of the situation; it is also part of the problem.

Badran's assessment of Amin's work is not just sympathetic but also positive at points. She asks questions about why they (including here) "celebrate" Qasim Amin:

Why do we celebrate the centenary of Qasim Amin's *Tahrir al-mar'a* when we have not celebrated the works of the women who wrote about women's liberation before Amin brought out his book? Is it because women's discourse was largely a "hidden discourse," or one that did not circulate widely in the "larger world"? Is it because, although the "woman question" was important, women were not important in their own right, and were not

public figures? (p. 62)

And her response to all of these questions is quite short: because Amin was a respected judge and because he wrote a book which became very controversial and provocative and later became part of the “national canon”. Perhaps a more critical appraisal of the work of Amin could have given her work more depth in addressing the kind of questions she repeatedly identifies in her work.

Later on in the same work, Badran notes that “Muslim women’s feminisms in the Middle East have emerged in the context of encounters with modernity, and that Islam has been implicated in the construction of these feminisms, as have notions of transnationality” (p. 215). The case of Amin was no exception to this encounter with modernity with the only difference that Amin was so deeply concerned with a singular, Eurocentric and colonial perception of modernity that his work would otherwise be seen as none but a European project for colonised people: to civilise them. This key issue is at the heart of the problem of the myth of emancipating the Muslim women, the other, and rescuing them. It is astonishing and alarming that the same kind of approach you see in Laura Bush’s statements when it came to the invasion of Afghanistan is embedded in the language of Amin more than a century ago.

As much as Badran’s assessment of the legacy of Amin may require further scrutiny, she provides a rather different narrative when it comes to Islamic feminism. She speculates that the new radical feminism in Muslim countries would be “Islamic feminism”. I reproduced Badran’s arguments here verbatim as they are important in my own research too. She argues for her claim in the following terms:

1. Islam is becoming a paramount cultural and political paradigm.
2. Muslim women, who are more highly educated in greater numbers than ever before, have begun gender-progressive readings of Islamic sacred scripture that will achieve - and indeed have already achieved - significant “feminist” breakthroughs.
3. Only the language of an “Islamic feminism” can potentially reach women of all classes and across urban-rural divides - or,

to put it slightly differently, the majority of Muslims can associate only with a “feminism” that is explicitly “Islamic.” 4. Because of increasing globalization and growing Muslim diaspora communities, Muslim women who practice Islam and want to embrace feminism need an Islamic feminism. 5. The globalized media and technology revolution produces a de-centered and denationalized feminism, and connects Muslim women both inside and outside predominantly Muslim nations or communities with each other. (p. 219)

I find her arguments reasonable but I am wondering if she were capable of traveling back in time to present these arguments to Qasim Amin, how he would have reacted to these statements. I am not sure Amin’s modernist penchants aligned with the colonial language would easily tolerate such bold statements. Reflecting on Iran and Islamic feminism, Badran mentions the *Zanan* magazine and its radical work as part of the discourse of Islamic feminism. Her note on the political contingencies in Iran deserve special attention:

The bold new interpretive work Iranian women are performing and disseminating through *Zanan* is being done inside the Middle East - and, moreover, inside an Islamic state. These women have experienced political and intellectual repression in the name of Islam inside the Islamic Republic of Iran. Only in the post-Khomeini era have they been able to carry on a public debate on gender questions based on their own rereadings of the Qur’an. (p. 235)

She further speaks about these women “enacting their own *ijtihad*” in articulating gender equality. While I am comfortable about this enactment, I am not so sure about how this enactment can indeed gain traction with the seemingly solid structure of religious authority which is now infused with political authority of the state – or rather with political power of the state. My sense is that this assessment – while it can give a promising prospect – is not quite cognisant of the intricacies of the relations of power and shifts in religious authority. I have noted this point earlier and I will continue to raise it in later chapters and with reference to my

interviews too. Badran does indeed note one area which is promising, even though it cannot powerfully articulate the issue I have raised:

These Iranian Islamic feminists are publicly and explicitly taking independent and risky positions on gender as they reinterpret the religion. They are not adjuncts to masculinist political projects. Quite to the contrary, they are finding a separate space between secular feminism and masculinist Islamism. It is what I call the middle ground, in the sense of “in-between space” (p. 236)

She is correct in pointing out that this is a “risky” approach; the patriarchal religious authority now married to the state does not respond well to such brave actions, but the very fact that this “in-between space” is nurtured is critical for the prospects of Islamic feminism in Iran. To be fair, in her other work (in Kynsilehto 2008), Badran seems to be aware of this limitation but even then her concern is about feminism not authority: “Although writers in *Zanan* publically identified with feminism, along with some others, those revered as creators of seminal texts of Islamic feminism firmly rejected the term” (p. 31)

I have spent a lot of time going into details of what Badran says on Islamic feminism. It would be pertinent to return to Iranian feminists who have voiced similar concerns but I believe are much more aware of the contingencies of the issue. A case in point is Ziba Mir-Hosseini. She captures the key questions which concern Muslim feminists, in an article (2006) immediately when she begins her piece:

Muslim jurists claim, and all Muslims believe, that justice and equality are intrinsic values and cardinal principles in Islam and the sharia. If this is the case, in a state that claims to be guided by the sharia, why are justice and equality not reflected in the laws that regulate gender relations and the rights of men and women? Why do Islamic jurisprudential texts—which define the terms of the sharia—treat women as second-class citizens and place them under men’s domination? (Mir-Hosseini 2006, p. 629)

She continues to highlight a point that Badran fails to notice in her assessment of Islamic feminism in Iran: “one paradoxical and unintended consequence of the Islamists’ reintroduction of sharia in Iran and their attempt to enforce its premodern mandates has been to open a new dialogue between Islamic law and feminism.” (p. 631). And I would like to particularly focus on this aspect of “unintended consequences” because it also plays a critical role in how Iranian women (and those in London) revisit their dress code and veil. The more restrictive and repressive policies have been on the veil in Iran, the more creative and more flexible women have become with their dress code. Yet, it does not seem that they have easily relinquished their connection with religion.

Before I bring this section to an end, it is important to briefly look at one of the arguments against Islamic feminism that Moghisi (1991) provides. Moghisi finds feminism in total contradiction with ‘Islam’ as she believes ‘Islam’ is essentially about the subjugation of women (more specifically dwelling on the Qur’an and political manifestations of Islam in contemporary times). In response to Moghisi’s objections, Miriam Cooke (2001) argues that:

She confounds Islam and Islamic fundamentalism, as though the two were the same. This slippage leads her to assert that there is a general pressure today to affirm Islam, regardless of whether or not one believes in it, so as to gain credibility. This affirmation, she dramatically asserts, “relies on twisting facts or distorting realities, ignoring or hiding that which should be clear” (135). Her very real fear is that to celebrate Islamic feminism is “to highlight only one of the many forms of identity available to Middle Eastern women, obscuring ways that identity is asserted or reclaimed, overshadowing forms of struggle outside religious practices and silencing the secular voices which are still raised against the region’s stifling Islamification policies” (Cooke 2001, p. 58)

The assumption that there is an inherent and organic link between ‘Islam’ – which is itself a problematic construct – and Islamism is a common thread in the arguments of secular feminists such as Moghisi and others who address other

aspects of Islam when it comes to any concept related to modernity and secularism. Therefore, it is always important to be mindful of such sloppy oversimplifications that only serve to corroborate an already firm position about Islam and Muslims.

Even though few Iranian feminists are discussed at this stage, since the overarching theme of this section was about Islamic feminism (and not just its Iranian version), I have tried to keep within the boundaries of the arguments and the theoretical aspects of it rather than focussing or comparing different case studies as such. The case of Egypt as I mentioned earlier provides ample evidence for the working of Orientalism, Eurocentric modernity and secularism with regard to Muslim women.

The veil: to abolish or to adopt?

As I will elaborate further in the section about my informants and their engagement with the issue of veil, Muslim women have had multiple and varied reasons for their engagement with the veil. One way of framing the question is through seeing motives and backgrounds through and from which different women tend to relinquish the practice of veil or adopt it, either within an 'Islamic' reading of either act or through a revisiting or rejection of it. It is also about negotiating the terms of the practice: on what grounds and what terms does a woman either adopt or relinquish the veil?

In this vein, it is interesting to look at the assessment of Leila Ahmed of the case of Egypt. In looking at Qasim Amin's work and his legacy, Ahmed points out the one of the key points about Amin's thesis was a concern about "changing customs regarding women and changing their costume, abolishing the veil in particular" in order to bring about "the desired general social transformation" (Ahmed 1992, p. 145). In evaluating the reactions and challenges that Amin's work from what was viewed by some as simply the conservative segments of Egyptian society, Ahmed traces the provenance of Amin's work to the discourse of European societies.

As I have covered earlier, a view of 'Islam' – which was as unproblematised then as it, probably to a lesser extent, today – formed an integral part of the discourse: it was “part of the Western narrative of the quintessential otherness and inferiority of Islam” (p. 149). What Ahmed pointed out in this regard is more or less what remains in force until our times even among certain academics. Ahmed argues that the Western narrative of women in Islam:

(1) often garbled and misconstrued the specific content and meaning of the customs described and (2) assumed and represented the Islam practiced in Muslim societies in the periods in which the Europeans encountered and then in some degree or other dominated those societies to be the only possible interpretation of the religion. (p. 149)

Ahmed traces back the history of viewing Muslim women as oppressed to earlier centuries but notes that “the issue of women only emerged as the centerpiece of the Western narrative of Islam in the nineteenth century, and in particular the later nineteenth century, as Europeans established themselves as colonial powers in Muslim countries” (p. 150). Thus, the connection of the emergence of this narrative to colonial policies is critical here. The narrative formed a coherent approach on the side of colonialists with a new focus on women and it emerged out of:

A coalescence between the old narrative of Islam just referred to (and which Edward Said's *Orientalism* details) and the broad, all-purpose narrative of colonial domination regarding the inferiority, in relation to the European culture, of all Other cultures and societies, a narrative that saw vigorous development over the course of the nineteenth century (p. 150).

One of the prominent aspects of the European discourse of feminism produced and enacted in Muslim countries was how it was at odds with the view of feminism in the Victorian society of the time. Victorian theories argued about “the biological inferiority of women and the naturalness of the Victorian ideal of the female role of domesticity. Such theories were politically useful to the Victorian establishment as

it confronted, internally, an increasingly vocal feminism” (p. 151). Yet, when the same theories went to colonised Muslim countries, it was only about rescuing Muslim women from oppression. What was seen alien and desirable at home was now to be pursued forcefully as a symbol of modernity. And as Ahmed points out, native Muslim writers, from among the male members of the Egyptian society, were complicit in promoting this language. It is in this context that the language of colonialism and feminism merge to make a connection between issues of culture and those of women (and this is noted in contemporary times in the work of Abu-Lughod and Mamdani, as I discussed earlier).

The lines of argument are strikingly straightforward and familiar as if we are reading a modern account of this narrative in the 21st century:

The thesis of the discourse on Islam blending a colonialism committed to male dominance with feminism— the thesis of the new colonial discourse of Islam centered on women— was that Islam was innately and immutably oppressive to women, that the veil and segregation epitomized that oppression, and that these customs were the fundamental reasons for the general and comprehensive backwardness of Islamic societies. (pp. 151-152)

As we can see, the idea that there is something essential and intrinsic to ‘Islam’ which is not present in other cultures or religions forms an important part of the discourse. This view is peculiarly persistent in narratives about diasporic communities too. I will expand this further in later chapters and argue that this connection is vital to deconstructing the prevalent image of Muslim women. In her discussion of the connection between Qasim Amin’s thesis in his controversial book and those of Lord Cromer, the British colonial officer in Egypt, Ahmed quotes a passage which is peculiarly reminiscent of Max Weber:

The inferiority of the men was evident in numerous ways, which Cromer lists at length. For instance: “The European is a close reasoner; his statements of fact are devoid of ambiguity; he is a natural logician, albeit he

may not have studied logic; he loves symmetry in all things... his trained intelligence works like a piece of mechanism. The mind of the Oriental on the other hand, like his picturesque streets, is eminently wanting in symmetry. His reasoning is of the most slipshod description.” (p. 152)

This is not only a Weberian idea about what a (modern) European man could be but also follows the same logic that John Locke was suggesting about the reasonableness or Christianity. It is ironic that Cromer, who was seen as the “champion of the unveiling of Egyptian women” was the “founding member and sometime president of the Men’s League for Opposing Women’s Suffrage” in England (p. 153).

Ahmed quotes passages from Amin’s work and draws parallels between his work and the words and policies of Cromer in Egypt:

Amin said that to make Muslim society abandon its backward ways and follow the Western path to success and civilization required changing the women. “The grown man is none other than his mother shaped him in childhood” and “this is the essence of this book... It is impossible to breed successful men if they do not have mothers capable of raising them to be successful. This is the noble duty that advanced civilisation has given to women in our age and which she fulfills in advanced societies”. (p. 156)

Amin’s knowledge about women in Egypt is questioned by Ahmed who argues that:

Amin must have drawn on conceptions of the character and conduct of women based on his own and other European or Egyptian men’s self-representations on the subject, rather than on any extensive observation of a broad-enough segment of female society to justify his tone of knowledgeable generalization. (p. 157)

Hence, she concludes that Amin’s assault on the veil was not seen as a reasonable

analysis but a product of internalising and reproducing colonialist ideas. Ahmed argues that this was the primary and the most potent force behind fierce reactions to Amin's work. However, in sections of Amin's work where a rational argument is provided against veil, Ahmed suggests that the role of Muhammad 'Abdu has probably been a reason behind it.

In assessing the responses to Amin's work, Ahmed notes that the rebuttals turned out to be an affirmation of customs of veiling and segregation. It became a voice and instrument of opposition (p. 162). Therefore, the very discourse itself got trapped into political narratives of resistance and opposition. The veil and the body of women thus turned into a battleground for male members of society to flex muscles over political contentions. It is in this context that feminism was also depicted in terms produced by Amin's narrative (and that of colonialists) by those who opposed it: "They accept at face value the equation made by Amin and the originating Western narrative: that the veil signified oppression, therefore those who called for its abandonment were feminists and those opposing its abandonment were antifeminists." (p. 162).

Quite unlike Badran's later and much more empathetic assessment of Amin's work, Ahmed believes that "Far from being the father of Arab feminism, then, Amin might more aptly be described as the son of Cromer and colonialism" (pp. 162-163). In supporting her claim that the entire dispute did not rest on issues of women themselves, Ahmed gives the example of the arguments between Qasim Amin and Tal'at Harb and believes that the exchange "centered not on feminism versus antifeminism but on Western versus indigenous ways. For neither side was male dominance ever in question" (p. 163).

The issue of a male-dominated, patriarchal society in all its spheres including in the area of engaging with religious scriptures seems totally absent. What is vividly missed here is the agency of women themselves. The game is played on terms set by the patriarchal setting rather than those generated by women themselves. Reiterating this point, Ahmed continues to say that:

The idea... that improving the status of women entails abandoning native customs was the product of a particular historical moment and was constructed by an androcentric colonial establishment committed to male dominance in the service of particular political ends. (p. 165)

She proceeds by identifying a striking resemblance in the arguments provided by the other side:

The peculiar resemblance to be found between the colonial and still-commonplace Western view that an innate connection exists between the issues of culture and women in Muslim societies and the similar presumption underlying the Islamist resistance position, that such a fundamental connection does indeed exist. The resemblance between the two positions is not coincidental: they are mirror images of each other. (p. 166)

These arguments or positions are viewed as mirror images of one another. One side argues for the liberation of Muslim women from oppression and the other side later develops a language to cast veil as 'protection' only in response and reaction to the colonial view. This dichotomy is part of a long-lasting problem which flares up in almost every discussion about women today. And we will see it in a different context, but with similar genealogies in the arguments of Shariat and Motahari in later chapters.

Towards the end of her assessment of Qasim Amin's legacy, Ahmed proposes that:

It was incorrect in its broad assumptions that Muslim women needed to abandon native ways and adopt those of the West to improve their status; obviously, Arab and Muslim women need to reject (just as Western women have been trying to do) the androcentrism and misogyny of whatever culture and tradition they find themselves in, but that is not at all the same as saying they have to adopt Western culture or reject Arab culture and Islam comprehensively (p. 166)

What Ahmed does not cover or scrutinise here is how the term 'Islam' is used in a singular and unitary manner. She correctly points to one of the fundamental bedrocks of the problem but articulating a more coherent analysis requires decoding this 'Islam'. Sami Zubaida (2011), among others have further pushed forward the boundaries of this debate. In the introductory chapter of his book (2011), Zubaida provides a broad narrative of how this conception of Islam as a unit, self-contained and comprehensive idea, with immutable and detailed norms are problematic. I will come back to Zubaida's arguments once again when I discuss issues of the diasporic communities in London.

To summarise the points I have discussed above, the question of abolishing or adopting the veil is mainly articulated in the language of a confrontation between colonialism, Orientalism and its legacy and that of its fierce opponents among Islamist and other male (or male-dominated) Muslim political and religious figures. The question is not that to abolish or to adopt the veil is inherently false; it is rather the question of the role of women themselves in articulating answers and responses to the question. It is not the male members of a society who should eventually confer agency upon women. It is how women can exercise the agency that they potentially have but must negotiate its exercise through various avenues.

Variations of dress code, its contingencies and complexities

In the early twentieth century, European styles of clothing spread into Muslim countries that aspired to modernise their socio-political lives. In the middle decades of the twentieth century these European styles of clothing gradually became the dominant form of clothing amongst men and modern urban women. This was especially true in Iran and Turkey, where the governments imposed Western clothing. In reaction, in the early 1970's the Islamic revivalist movement resulted in many women started wearing the hijab. But the hijab that they adopted was different from that worn by the older generation, and it was therefore called "new veiling" (Macleod, 1991). The new veiling was a different style of covering, worn by young middle class and educated women who had previously worn Western-style

clothes (Guindi, 1981). In her detailed work about the lower-middle-class women in Cairo, Macleod (1991) interrogates the implications of modernizing the Egyptian society. Women from the poorer segments of society have to adjust their dress code in order to gain a higher economic status. Without necessarily downplaying the role of religion in the choices these women make to adopt the veil, she highlights the tension for these women of Cairo who wish to have an income in their precarious economic situation and at the same time be mindful not to be considered morally lax among the conservative society around them. Contrary to the settings of the earlier century, the driving force for these women for the adoption of the veil is not reaction to modernity or colonial policies. Motivations are primarily about improving their quality of life and having reasonable means to make their ends meet. As such, the veil turns into an important tool for economic dignity.

The anthropology of clothing is central to the study of hijab. (For further see Barnes, 1993; Hendrickson, 1996; Tarlo, 1996). Shared dress reflects shared cultural values with the people in our social group. Clothing is therefore a means for creating community and defining the wearer's individual characteristics such as religious orientation, gender, ethnicity, class orientation, and lifestyle (Abu-Lughod, 2000; Rugh, 1986a). Different forms of hijab and women's dress code, too, are central in creating different communities and social networks.

Ethnographic research on hijab practice has been instrumental in facilitating the understanding of the empowerment of women in different parts of the world and helped to elucidate their subjective experiences. Some of this work has been done in Islamic countries and some in the diasporic Muslim communities in the West¹³. In Iran, the 'Islamic feminist' discourse views hijab as a right and not a duty, and it offers juristic reasons to support this argument. Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2007) traces the lineage of the emerging juristic positions on hijab in Islamic jurisprudence, and argues that in Iran, the notion of hijab has evolved in response to socio-political

¹³ A selected list of ethnographies follows, divided by region. 1) For Egypt, see: Abu-Lughod 2000; Guindi 1981; Hoodfar 1991; Williams 1979; Rugh 1986a; Macleod 1991; Zuhur 1992; Watson 1994; Mahmood 2004. 2) India: Sharma 1978; Osella & Osella 2007. 3) Morocco: Hessini 1994. 4) Indonesia: Brenner 1996; Smith-Hefner 2007. 5) Pakistan: Alvi 2013. 6) Saudi Arabia: Ramazani 1983; AlMunajjed 1997. 7) Yemen: Makhoul & Obermeyer 1979; Moors 2007. 8) Oman: Wikan 1991; Haddad 1984. 9) UK: Tarlo 2009; Kariapper 2009. 10) Canada: Hoodfar 1991; Sheila McDonough 2003; Bullock 2002. 11) Netherland: A. Moors 2009.

factors. She shows that the new juristic positions on hijab allow a common ground to be established between secular and Islamic feminist. For instance, Reza Shah's unveiling order in 1936 led to hijab being used as a sign of protest in the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The banning of hijab was legislated in 1936 in the period of the Reza Shah's reign. According to this law, women were not allowed to wear *chador*¹⁴, headscarf, and *piche*¹⁵. After the 1979 revolution, Morteza Motahari's (2010) and Ali Shariati's (1994) works on hijab shaped a new Islamic discourse on hijab. The new juristic positions saw hijab as a means of protection rather than, in the classic jurisprudential perspective, a means of confinement. This idea of viewing hijab as protection not restriction has become one of the dominant themes for articulating various approaches to the enforcement of hijab, specifically the state-centred, top down compulsions that dominate the policies of the Islamic Republic in Iran. The view is shared in certain segments of society and among certain groups of women. The view is, however, strongly contested when it comes to either challenging the authority of the state to delineate policies or dress code or when it pertains to challenging dominant norms among religious authorities.

¹⁴ *Chador* is a long, round-shaped, black piece of cloth that covers from head to toe. The exact nature of the *chador* varies by countries.

¹⁵ *Piche* was a piece of fabric that women used to cover their face and was tied to the head with a ribbon. It is not used in Iran today.



Figure 1: An Example of *Piche* (The White Face Covering) Worn by Iranian Women During Pahlavi Dynasty

Hoodfar (2003) has studied veiled Muslim women in Canada. On the basis of her interviews, she argues that although the veil was developed in a patriarchal framework as a way of controlling women, some women have used veiling to fight against patriarchy. Therefore, veiling has different meanings in different contexts. Hoodfar argues against perceiving veiling as a necessarily oppressive practice in Muslim societies. She suggests that veiling should be examined in a wider framework in order to situate “the veil within the history of clothing as a vehicle for political and social expression and action” (2003, p. 37).

Hoodfar shows that women have used veiling to empower themselves and make structural changes in their society, and that veiling has helped many women to challenge those patriarchal traditions that deny women’s rights to mobility, access to education, and ability to have a proper job in society. On the basis of her interviews, she demonstrates that there are many different reasons for veiling. Beyond religious and personal reasons, she finds still other overlapping reasons for adopting the veil. For example, some women enjoy more freedom after adopting the veil because their restrictive parents give them more space due to the consent and trust that comes with the hijab.

Hoodfar (2003) states that clothing is an important symbol and an influential tool for non-verbal communication. In contrast to the pervasive view amongst the general public in the West that the veil and its meaning are static, the function of hijab in Muslim cultures has varied greatly, especially during periods of rapid social change. Hoodfar (2003) believes that wearing hijab is an experience that is full of contradictions and conflicting meanings for the women who practice it. For example, it has been a means to control women's lives, and it has also been a tool for women to empower themselves and make structural changes in their societies. Following Hoodfar's narrative, it is clear that the constructed binary of restriction/oppression vs. empowerment is problematic and there is no clear-cut distinction between the two. What is sometimes viewed as oppression or restriction for some, may indeed open up some space for exercising one's agency and negotiating some terms of social interaction. However, this does not necessarily enhance the state-centred narrative dominant in the Islamic Republic.

In her fieldwork in Canada, Hoodfar found that women practiced veiling as a way to challenge patriarchal practices that denied women's rights. Although she argues that hijab has empowered women in some contexts, this does not mean that the rule mandating hijab in conventional Islamic jurisprudence is validly justifiable, because these women have been afforded no other choice.

In line with Hoodfar, Sheila McDonough (2003) shows that in Canada, Muslim women who wear hijab have different interpretations of their use, and different degrees of agency in determining what suits them. This results in diverse perspectives on hijab. For some of her interviewees, hijab was a source of dignity and empowerment. For others, removing the veil was empowering. Both choices are understandable, and both can be beneficial for individuals depending on contextual variables.

Bullock (2002) has researched Muslim women in order to understand their hijab practice and to understand the public image of veiled women in Canada. Her arguments challenge both the popular cultural view of veiling and the liberal feminist view that hijab is innately oppressive. She has studied the re-veiling movement in Canada (that had grown up amongst Muslims in the previous decade)

by interviewing veiled women to see how and why they veil. She offers a positive account of the veil, arguing that if anything is oppressing women, it is 'Islamic law' and not Islam, and that those Islamic laws should be removed or changed.

Bullock argues that any oppression comes from 'Islamic law' and not Islam itself, and that those Islamic laws should be abolished or changed. As Asef Bayat lucidly explains in his outstanding work, *Making Islam Democratic* (2007a), there is no such thing as Islam as we understand it out there and the conventional Islam is what is seen and observed. Building on what Bayat argues here, when we shift the focus from 'Islam' to Muslims, the next stage of the argument, when it comes to issues of women and the veil, is that the terms of dress code are determined by male jurist: it is the jurisprudential apparatus which is socially, politically and intellectually dominant that define these limits. Women do indeed have a role in negotiation and resisting these terms, but the role of patriarchal hierarchies here is critical here. Even when we speak about legislation, education of women, class differences, what cuts across all these is the domination of male members of society in influencing these terms and norms.

Muslim feminists, amongst others, argue that all women should have the power to choose whether or not to wear the headscarf. According to the conventional Shia *fiqh* and social norms, however, a hijabi woman is expected and even coerced to cover all parts of her body except her hands and face in front of all men, apart from her *mahrams* (her husband and all male relatives with whom marriage is forbidden—her father, son, brother, uncle, father-in-law, nephew, grandfather, and maternal and paternal uncles). Amongst Shia Iranians, it is always expected from a woman to wear the headscarf in front of any man apart from her *mahrams* in private spaces. This only relates to the more conservative Muslims amongst whom women usually observe hijab due to socio-religious obligation. These hijabi women do not have the choice not to wear a scarf in their house in front of close non-*mahram* friends and family. Therefore, we must be careful not to generalise that hijab is empowering or oppressive across all contexts; it can be either.

In line with Tarlo (2009), I do not want to argue for or against a particular type of dress code. There is a vast literature expressing approval or disapproval of the hijab

that condemns or defends veiling on moral, religious and political grounds. In *Visibly Muslim*, Tarlo shows that the dress code of Muslim women in Britain is undergoing major transformations, “shaped both by local and global social religious and political forces and by issues of personal aesthetics, ethics, fashion, identity and faith.” (2009, p. 2).

She suggests that changes in the visual and material landscape are better understood:

Not in terms of some mythical opposition between Islam and the West, religion and secularism, or tradition and modernity but rather in terms of complex debates about identity, faith, politics, ethics, aesthetics, and belonging. What is highlighted is the diversity of modern Muslim perspectives on these issues and the different sartorial possibilities they are generating (ibid).

Tarlo’s book is different from other works on hijab because she moves beyond the debates about hijab being oppressive or liberating, and instead focuses on the form of hijab, the diversity of meanings behind it, and the activities that surround it.

The idea of fashion is central to Tarlo’s work. She demonstrates that the headscarf actually makes women more visible in Britain. She argues that Muslim fashions and anti-fashions are reduced to a binary opposition between veiled and un-veiled, and that this results in conceptual blindness. She believes that we should move beyond seeing veiled women as oppressed and submissive, and un-veiled women as liberated, free, and progressive. This reduction has led to the sanctioning of cultural stereotypes by the state and has had a direct affect in shaping policy. Tarlo (2007) demonstrates that however personal a woman’s decision to adopt hijab, this decision is always influenced by social interactions and discourses which both form and are formed by it.

Tarlo (2009) discusses different features of hijab practice amongst Muslim women in London without engaging with the hijabi’s personal reasons behind their hijab practice. In addition, she has studied Muslim women in general, and not those from a specific country or community. My work differs from hers in that I can give a more

in-depth description and explanation of the topic since I focus exclusively on the relatively small groups of Iranian Muslim diaspora in London, their different dress codes, and transformations in their dress code. Specific historical, cultural and individual reasons for this transformation are central to my work. My work explains the current state of hijab practice amongst Iranians, the different motives behind it, the way it has been shaped, and the way it is changing.

Walking a Tightrope by Ayesha Salma Kariapper (2009) is based on research on the hijab of Muslim women in the UK, and especially in London. The majority of her interviewees are second and third generation Pakistanis who have adopted the veil themselves, unlike their mothers or grandmothers. She tries to understand the increasing number of Muslim women who adopt 'Islamic' forms of attire. Separate from issues of dress, Kariapper also considers issues that are intertwined with veiling such as "racism, gender discrimination, identity politics, Muslim youth activism and government policy" (2009, p. 2). She argues that hijab is a passport to engaging in society for many Muslim women, and that it is wrong to deny the agency of these Muslim women in their daily life. In her own words, "Britain's case illustrates that it is time to re-evaluate our framework of assessing women's empowerment in Muslim contexts including in the diaspora and to use alternative frameworks of power and agency to understand the lives of women from Muslim communities and the challenges they confront" (2009, p. 103).

Annelies Moors (2009; 2007) has examined the relation between Islamic dress code and fashion in different parts of the world, particularly the Netherlands (for discussions of hijab and fashion, see also Abaza 2007; Sandikci & Ger 2005; Kılıçbay & Binark 2002; Balasescu 2003; Balasescu 2007; Tarlo 2009). Moors (2009) investigated how Muslim women in the Netherlands have combined the (assumed) two worlds of religion and fashion. On the basis of her observations and her subjects' narratives, she identified two developments that led Muslim women to wear fashionable yet Islamic dress: Islamic dress as an outcome of the Islamic revival movement, and the turn to fashionable styles of dress as a part of consumer culture. She concluded:

By wearing fashionable styles of Islamic dress, many young Muslim women simultaneously engage in a religious practice and take into account that they do so in an environment that has become increasingly hostile to the presence of Islam. In the Netherlands, young, well-educated Muslim women employ a politics of (visual) presence that brings together their religious convictions with styles of dress that are highly fashionable and hence bear the sign of modernity (2009, p. 197).

Andrea Rugh's (1986b) work on Cairo shows that the common notion that Islamic styles of clothing are more restrictive than Western ones is false. For many women, Islamic dresses are cooler because they are loose and made of cotton. Western clothes are made of hotter fabrics. Rugh also found that in the past, Western-style clothes had been a sign of being middle class, but by the time of her research this had changed, and hijab was also a sign of the middle class. She argues that the meaning of the hijab depends on the spatio-temporal contexts in which it is worn, like any other piece of clothing. In line with Rugh, Arlene Elowe Macleod (1991) also argues that Western dress is hotter than Islamic dress. However, in Iran, and for the Iranian women in London, this is not the case. The clothes they wear are not cooler, and can even be hotter, especially because of the scarf. In the summer it is even worse.

Mir-Hosseini (2011) outlines five notions of hijab in Iran. The first is hijab as "seclusion". This mainly refers to pre-modern Iran, in which hijab was a means of preventing women from entering the social sphere. Hijab was a kind of confinement.

The second notion is hijab as "protection". This was introduced by Morteza Motahari (2010 [first published in 1985]), and became the ideology of the Islamic Republic after the 1979 Revolution. This treats hijab as a tool to bring women into society while protecting them from any sexual harm. The burden and responsibility therefore rests on women not to be provocative.

The third notion is hijab as “protest”, introduced by Shariati (1994). Unlike Motahari, Shariati does not engage with *fiqh*¹⁶ on the issue of hijab. He articulates a new meaning for hijab: hijab as a symbol of protest against the Shah’s regime, rather than a symbol of tradition. Shariati differentiates between two groups of women. Women in the first group wear hijab because of tradition, imitating their mothers. Women in the second group chose to wear hijab as a personal response to Westernised consumerism.

The fourth notion is hijab as “imposition”, which also appeared after the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Due to the imposition of hijab, all women are obliged to wear a specified dress code. In cases of disobedience they will be arrested and punished.

The final notion presented by Mir-Hosseini is hijab as “choice”. She argues that, although debates on the notion of hijab in Muslim countries are between feminists who see hijab as oppression and Islamists who see it as women’s liberty, some hijabi women have chosen this dress code by their own volition and with clear reasons. The term ‘choice’ Mir-Hosseini uses is problematic because one has to determine under what circumstances these women have chosen to observe hijab. According to Foucault (1987) there are many power structures that compel people to act in a certain way.

The five-part dress categories¹⁷, which have been generated, based on ethnographic observation and analysis that I describe in Chapter Five cannot be directly linked to any one of these five notions that Mir-Hosseini has depicted, because not all of the women of my study practice hijab (in a strict sense) in London. Nonetheless, there is a degree of overlap as these notions were useful for some of the women whom I interviewed.

¹⁶ According to Mir-Hosseini (2000b), there is a distinction between *fiqh* and *sharia* regarding the concept of law in Islam. Muslims do not usually distinguish between these two terms. *Sharia* refers to the revealed law about the blueprints of mankind for both this world and the next. *Fiqh* refers to jurisprudence, meaning ‘understanding and knowledge’. *Fiqh* is the intellectual activity that tries to discover divine blueprints, extracts rules and legal systems from them, and enforces duties upon believers.

¹⁷ As I detail later, this consists of: 1) The “full traditional hijab”; 2. The “full progressive hijab”; 3. The “partial-hijab”; 4. The “conservative scarf-less”; and 5. The “radical hijab-less”.

As I have already explained on Chapter One, discourse is central to this research. In light of theories of discourse, the meanings of the veil and of veiling can also be seen as discursive constructs. Amongst the most influential of the cultural elements forming the meaning of the veil are the teachings and rhetoric of religious leaders who consider veiling an inevitable part of religious life, and who therefore exclude un-veiled women from organised religious rituals and institutions.

Theories of discourse also stress the contestation of different groups with different heritages over the interpretation of cultural symbols (Bartkowski, 1997; Todd and Fisher, 1988; Wodak, 1997). In the case of veiling, various factions of Muslim scholars—from the most traditional to the liberal modernists—offer extremely different interpretations of the meaning and implications of the related Quranic verses and *Hadiths*¹⁸. Discourse thus highlights the multidimensionality of religious norms and forms like hijab. Theorists of discourse view it not as mere ideologies but as culturally constructed ways of acting in and understanding the world (Bartkowski, 1997; Todd and Fisher, 1988; Wodak, 1997). A devout Muslim woman living in London encounters not only her fellow Muslim women but also non-believers, and her gender identity, standpoint, subjectivity, and bodily practice are constituted under the influence of both ‘non-Muslim’ and ‘Muslim’ discourses. Indeed, these discourses are often firmly defined in terms of negotiation with or opposition to each other.

These theoretical perspectives show how discursive regimes provide social agents with symbolic resources for identity negotiation and for the legitimisation of daily social and bodily practices. Ambiguity, contradiction, and struggle are inseparable parts of the process of identity negotiation. The decision to veil can be legitimated on a variety of grounds, and using discourses that are anti-feminist or explicitly feminist or something in between. A feminist discourse might be occidental feminism, which sees hijab as a form of oppression, or Islamic feminism, which sees hijab as a form of empowerment that Western feminists cannot fully appreciate. Feminist theorists (notably Judith Butler) consider

¹⁸ *Hadith* refers to sayings that have been attributed to the Prophet Mohammad and his family. It is one of the sources of Islamic law.

discourse as a medium through which gender is constructed (Butler, 1999; Todd and Fisher, 1988; Wodak, 1997). I will therefore show how Muslim women use their everyday experiences to re-shape their understanding of the veil (Read and Bartkowski, 2000), focusing on diasporic Iranian Shia women.

As I have shown above, there is a vast body of literature on issues related to my research. My theoretical framework is a contingent and processual framework that I divide into five schemas (see Chapter Five). Each of the five schemas is based on different theories. The Islam and modernity debate is linked to all five forms of hijab practice that I have identified except for “full traditional hijab”. The relationship between Islam and modernity is key to this research, and my interviews with Iranian women centre on this problematic. Butler’s (1999) performativity, and Mir-Hosseini’s (2011) five notions of hijab are all important tools to develop my analysis of hijab practice amongst Iranian women. Individualism, too, is a central conceptual tool in this research since in some ways, hijab is a response to the demands of individual subjectivities, and one can answer the question of Islam and modernity through exploring the requirements of the expansion of individualism amongst Muslim women in the contemporary world.

I investigate hijab as discourse as well as practice. Hijab is both a form of clothing and an institution with a particular history and politics. Foucault addresses “the styling of the self” (1987), and in this work, he moves away from the view that discourse produces docile bodies or docile subjects to one where subjects have a degree of agency and creativity. This can be applied to my five-part schema, and to how women create their own style of hijab (See Chapter Five). Through Foucauldian techniques of the self, the relation between the structure and the subject is problematized, because in the techniques of the self, the moral self is both the subject of and is subject to knowledge and power (Aly, 2011).

I have therefore set out to identify the discursive forces that shape the concept and practice of hijab in the local and globally connected contexts of London. I am interested in the way that hijab has been imagined and discursively represented by Iranian women in London. In addition I seek the roots of these beliefs and practices

in history and in jurisprudence (Islamic law) of their implications for diasporic Iranian women today.

Methodology

In this section, I address the primary methods used in my fieldwork, and the methodological issues that I faced. Methods include participant observation, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, life histories, netnography, and auto-ethnography.

Although no method is neutral, to fail to discuss the methodology of the study may lead the reader to think that there have not been any objective criteria for the selection of methods of research. As a methodological pluralist, my main criterion for the selection of methods in this study has been their practicality and suitability for my research questions.

The participants

I conducted 40 in-depth interviews with Iranian women in London, and interviewed four prominent male Muslim intellectuals, scholars and clerics who have worked on and talked about hijab in Iran (Kadivar, Eshkevari, Fanaei, and Torkashvand). All of the women interviewed were born and raised in Iran. They came to London because they or their family members held a job in the UK or a place in higher education. None of them were political-refugees, as happened earlier (see Chapter Four) but like the majority of Iranians, most of them were supporting political reform in Iran.

I am of course aware of the inherent limitations of my interview database amongst Iranian women in London. To compensate for this shortcoming, I made special efforts to interview a wide spectrum of women with diverse opinions. I benefited from my personal contacts to locate and persuade informed interviewees that otherwise will not agree to be questioned for such a research convened by a non-Iranian and non-Muslim researcher. The vast majority of Iranian women will not open up to a stranger on a topic related to dress code without personal introduction. My personal ties, thus, significantly assisted me in this study since keeping body-related matters secret from strangers is seen as essential to preserving modesty and

without personal trust it is extremely difficult to penetrate into the deeper layers of women's experience with regards to hijab.

I tried to ask more professional and specific questions on hijab and dress code that encouraged the interviewee to give a detailed empirical account of her own personal experience rather than asking general politically or ideologically sensitive questions that given the political and cultural sensibility of most Iranians may lead to wild improbable interpretations.

My research differs from other works on hijab practice in the diasporic communities, because most other works is done on second or third generations who have been born and grown up in the West, while I was interested in the transitions in hijab practice amongst Iranian women who have come to London. The age range is 22 to 57, but most are between 25 and 35. They are all educated and regard themselves belonging to the middle class. Many are students who came to England for higher education, and some of them have top jobs in the city.

Before starting my fieldwork, I planned to interview five to ten women from each of four pre-specified groups derived from my own experience. These four groups were: 1) Women who observed hijab in Iran and continued to observe it in London. 2) Women who observed hijab in Iran but gave up wearing hijab after living in London. 3) Women who did not observe hijab in Iran (except in public places where they are required by law to wear it) but began doing so in London. 4) Women who did not observe hijab in Iran, and still do not do so. After my first interview, I found that individuals did not fit only in one category, and therefore I discarded the four groups, determining that I would have to change the way I chose my interviewees. The above-mentioned way of seeing the hijab practice proved to be superficial, because many of the women did not fit into it and had undergone multiple transitions in their life, both before and after coming to London.

I continued interviewing the women I chose on the basis of the four groups, but the outcome of these interviews led to my new five-part categories, which I will explain in detail in Chapter Five. I interviewed around 10 women from each of the four groups I mentioned above.

All my interviewees are from a sub-group of the Iranian diaspora who have living experience of both the Iranian and UK contexts. This 'transnational nexus'¹⁹ is about encounters and experiences with various kinds of state-related policies and structures, everyday practices and encounters with different kinds of hijabi and non-hijabi women, personal histories and transformations through knowledge and experiences acquired in Iran and UK.

This transnational nexus is a very precarious one since most of my subjects were unsure of whether they are staying in UK or returning to Iran, a large part of it dependent on Iranian political and economic changes. This leads to a unique way of considering hijab, which is not yet evident in the literature that currently focuses on hijab as an ossified entity representing something quite explicit, whether it be from traditional/conservative or Eurocentric views to do with containment and oppression. Literature on hijab and agency has missed out on the nuances of what hijab may mean and how it could have reverse meanings to expectations – that is where appearance/image does not match with an individuals' motivations.

My work is different from research on second or third generation Muslim migrants who, unlike most of my interviewees, are permanently based in the Western societies. My subjects of study have a more continual, reflexive and geographically contingent approach to how they dress in this transnational nexus. The processual, temporal and geographic spaces in UK and Iran lead to various views and practices of hijab amongst my interviewees and have led me to developing the categories explained in Chapter Five.

Why I chose this sub-group of diaspora in London is partly due to the difficulties and possible political costs of doing research in Iran and amongst other sub-groups of the Iranian diaspora. These possible political costs are partly borne from the sensitivity of the topic in Iran and partly caused by my own positionality (coming from a well-know reformist political family).

¹⁹ For literature on 'transnational nexus' see (Al-Ali and Koser, 2004; Al-Ali et al., 2001; Basch et al., 2005, 2005; Grillo, 2007; Hannerz, 2002; Rogers, 1986; Vertovec and Cohen, 1999)

I have many Iranian friends and there are many Iranian women with different types of dress code who I know in London. Consequently, some of my interviewees are my friends, but I also tried my best to interview individuals who I did not know closely. I attended events such as Iranian concerts and cultural and religious talks to observe and find my interviewees. There are both advantages and disadvantages to interviewing people who you already know, and to being an insider and studying one's own social group. I found that some of my interviewees who already knew me were more comfortable sharing their experiences, were more eager and happy to allocate time for me, and explained things in more detail compared to the women who did not know me.

All of the interviews took place in London. I asked the interviewees to suggest the best place to have a chat. Some of the women came to my home. For others, I went to their home, university, or workplace, or we met at a coffee shop. The length of the interviews ranged from thirty minutes to five hours, with an average time of one to two hours. I interviewed some of the interviewees twice because we did not have enough time in one session.

Being a 'hijabi' (that is someone who wears a hijab) myself introduced its own complexities. The first impression I presented might have not been positive for some of the women who did not observe hijab. This was not a problem for those interviewees who knew me or who were my friends, but for some of the women who were hijab-less and did not know me, it was a challenge to open a discussion and show them that I do not have any prejudices on the subject of the hijab and was open to explore other possibilities. The way I opened up the discussion and told them my own story was important.

As I show in the following chapters, because hijab has been compulsory in Iran, in most cases, there exists an invisible tension between hijabi and non-hijabi women. People (and especially women) judge each other very quickly on the basis of appearance. For Iranians in the diaspora, this judgement can become more excessive because many non-hijabi women associate hijabi women with the government in Iran. Non-hijabi women may assume that others only observe hijab

because they or their families are Iranian government employees and that they are obliged to wear it.

It was a challenge for me to show that I was a researcher, that my hijab was due to personal choice, and that I was not related to the Iranian government administration. The style of full-hijab I practice is very similar to that worn by women who work for or are supporters of the government. Women's dress code in the Iranian context means a lot more than what clothing usually means (Hoodfar, 2003). It conveys a huge amount of information, because women's dress has been regulated and politicised for so long. It was important to convince my interviewees not to think that I was judging them and to stop them from judging me. Interviews with hijabi women were easier because they felt at first glance that they had more in common with me, although in terms of my politics and philosophy, there were many differences. In practice, a number of factors proved to be helpful in gaining the trust of hijab-less Iranians in London and made my interviewees more comfortable and willing to open up during the interviews. One factor was the fact that my father and brother are well-known Iranian public figures pushing for political reform in Iran. Furthermore, amongst my interviewees, I am known to be visibly critical of Iranian government administration and to be respectful of life-styles and beliefs different than of mine.

Positionality

As a progressive Muslim woman shaped by the education I have received in Iran and the UK, I interpret the meaning of different forms of hijab differently from a Western scholar or a traditionalist Muslim. I am aware that there is a range of views among both Western scholars and traditional Muslims and the diversity also shows that my own perception may fall somewhere in between these categories. However, the fact that my own being comes into play in this knowledge does not harm the limitations of objectivity and method, but, quite the opposite, it makes my universe of discourse apparent and conscious (Weinsheimer, 1985, p. 225). Every researcher – including myself – conditions his/her interpretation of a given reality/text by pre-understandings arising from his/her background and conditions. By pre-understandings, I mean a set of attitudes and assumptions that one consciously or

unconsciously brings to the interpretation and perception of reality. Although it is impossible to totally separate oneself from these pre-understandings, one can minimize the effect of them on perception of reality by certain measures. Motivation arising from some degree of self-criticism and alienation is amongst the measures that can contribute to a more objective analysis of the topic of my research.

While benefiting from the advantages of having an Iranian and Shia background – that made the very conduct of this research amongst religious Iranian women possible – I hope to have minimized the effects of my pre-understandings by cultivating a comparative eye by reading about and exploring other forms of dress code and systems of beliefs. It goes without saying that my aim with this thesis is not so much to expose the genuine and true form or articulation of hijab in Shia Islam as to critically and empirically examine how Iranian women encounter modernity's implacable demands for change in their hijab and dress code.

Most Anthropological methods presume being an outsider to the culture that is being studied. James Spradley believes that:

The more you know about a situation as an ordinary participant, the more difficult it is to study it as an ethnographer. It is no coincidence that ethnography was born and developed in the study of non-Western cultures. The less familiar you are with a social situation the more you are able to see the tacit cultural rules at work (1980, p. 2)

From the first moment that I decided to work on this subject, I had to overcome this burden of challenges. Nonetheless, one must also take into account the political and ideological backdrop of such approaches. The way Spradley views ethnography and non-Western cultures clearly warrants critical reflection too. Prejudices which have been part of the study of non-Western cultures and oriental societies have placed not only limitations on the study of these societies but have at times (as I will demonstrate shortly afterwards and also discussed in the section on modernity) skewed and distorted the image. This is particularly more visible in the case of women and veil in Muslim societies.

Hennigh (1981) argues that studying one's own culture is a completely different experience from studying a culture that you are not familiar with. He suggests that the outcome of these two perspectives equally differ, and should be considered by their own standards. Therefore, familiarity with or the exoticism of the culture we are studying has both advantages and disadvantages.

Many scholars have started working on their own 'ethnicity' or 'culture'. This is supported by some anthropologists, and criticised by others (Alexander, 2006; Ratcliffe, 2001). The merits of being an insider or an outsider to the subject of study have been vigorously debated. Nancy Naples (2003) believes that being an outsider or an insider is a matter of construction. Even when we are working in a familiar setting, we are still reconstructing meanings. Every individual reconstructs meaning differently, and an insider will encounter many unanticipated meanings in the practices of others (Aly, 2011).

John Aguilar (1981) argues that anthropologists who research their own people should not think that their belonging is unconstructed. He discusses advantages and disadvantages of research at home. The positive side of being an insider is that it is easier to blend into the culture. Insiders know the language better and also have a better understanding of non-verbal and subjective data. Being an insider will make the researcher less likely to attach misrepresentative labels. The negative side to being an insider is that interviewees might not reveal sensitive information or may not give complete information, expecting the researcher to already know everything. Also, because the context is familiar to the researcher, they may accept things without question instead of analysing them.

In line with Aly (2011), I believe that my position as an insider has both advantages and disadvantages. There is a burden to representing those who I consider as my own people. Being a hijabi myself while representing multiple perspectives makes it difficult to ascertain how the reader will react, because as I mentioned before, the topic of hijab has become very sensitive. Most of the women I interviewed asked me to recount how other women answered the questions and told me that they looked forward to reading my thesis. Many of the interviewees asked me about my own reasons and motives for wearing hijab. Since what I am has impacted the nature of

the research and its results, for the sake of clarity and transparency, I need to provide the reader with some background information about myself.

I was born into a liberal religious family in Iran, and lived in Tehran until the age of 22. My father is a progressive Muslim and a well-known Iranian intellectual, and I grew up in an environment where I frequently encountered many religious intellectuals who have had considerable influence on my beliefs. My mother is a hijabi with a more traditional style of religiosity from that of my father's. This has exposed me, from an early age, to different interpretations of Islam and different family and friendship networks. Before starting this research, my views about hijab were very different from what they are now. Having a network of friends and family that included many different types of dress code further attuned me to the topic, and helped me to know and appreciate different people. Unlike most of my friends who have the same dress code, I had the opportunity to have close friendships with a wide range of non-hijabi women with completely different lifestyle from mine.

Anthropology at home

To clarify the somewhat unspecific term 'anthropology at home', Donald Messerschmidt (1981) divides it into three types. The first is insider anthropology, which applies to anthropologists who are from a dominant ethnic group and do research on a dominated ethnic group. The second is native anthropology, in which those from minority/dominated ethnic groups do research on their own people. The third is indigenous anthropology, where anthropologists from the 'Global South'²⁰ do research on their own society.

Based on this categorisation, I am considered a native anthropologist because the Shia Iranian community is my own community (Eriksen, 2002). But this is only one facet of my identity, and there are several differences in life experience between the Iranian community in general and myself.

²⁰ The global South or less developed countries (LDCs) are considered to be "peripheral" nations because they are not in the centre of trade, industry, or high level services and therefore do not hold the necessary amount of wealth that a country needs in order to exert political leverage.

As I mentioned earlier, insider/native/local anthropology has both positive and negative sides. Many anthropologists have written about the restrictions of native anthropology (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Stephenson and Greer, 1981). Stephenson and Greer (1981) believe that local researches may not see relevant cultural patterns because they take them for granted. They argue that local/insider/native anthropologists should include all details in their ethnography to avoid missing important aspects. John Stephenson (1981) also states that seeing what she calls local anthropology as positive or negative depends on the researcher's prior relationship with the subject and prior knowledge of the community. John Gwaltney (1987) argues that in local/insider/native anthropology, interviewees might not say certain things because they assume that the researcher knows that information already.

Overall, local/insider/native anthropology—in my case, the Iranian diaspora of which I am a member—has both positive and negative consequences. I tried my best to minimise the negative aspects, such as failing to see things an outsider would notice. At the same time, I was able to connect with and access women's experiences and open up with people much easier than someone from outside this group. It could be argued that a large part of the information/meanings/insights that I gathered from my interviewees could not have been gathered by outsider anthropologists. To minimize the risk that I omit important details that an outsider would notice, following Stephenson and Greer (1981), when practical I report unbroken excerpts from interviews to record the subjects' own words.

Auto-ethnography

I used auto-ethnography in this research because I am part of the Iranian diaspora and I wear hijab. Auto-ethnography involves the researcher analysing personal experience in order to understand cultural practices. Auto-ethnography accepts and welcomes subjectivity, emotionality and the researcher's impact on the research, instead of pretending that the researcher does not exist (Ellis et al., 2010).

This research has been both interesting and painful for me because it addresses my own story. I realized the pain I took wearing full-hijab in the previous 26 years was

unnecessary since the conventional hijab does not have sound religious justification. In my interviews I also heard painful stories regarding oppression and the sexual assault on my informants. Through this journey, the way I feel and think about hijab has changed, as have my views. This is both positive and difficult. On the one hand, it has been an illuminating and emancipating personal journey, and on the other, it has been hard because due to social and emotional costs, I have chosen to continue wearing the same form of hijab as before, even though I do not value it anymore. Here, there is a point which requires further qualification and explanation. The fact that I am convinced I adopted hijab by my own volition and choice does not conflict with the way I have reviewed and revised this position. The limitations which lead to this situation whereby you no longer attach the same significance to an earlier practice and yet you continue to maintain all or some aspects of it are a product of contexts and issues which may sometimes be beyond one's control. This is a shared experience. It is both a personal narrative and also a reflection of the stories of my interviewees.

Through auto-ethnography and insider anthropology, I intend to produce evocative thick descriptions (Geertz, 1994) of personal and interpersonal experiences, understanding patterns of culture that can be seen through field notes, storytelling, and interviews. As an auto-ethnographer, I will make personal experience meaningful and cultural experiences engaging, while also reaching wider and more diverse audiences by producing accessible texts that may have an impact on other people (Ellis et al., 2010; Goodall, 2006).

Doing ethnography in people's homes gives a sense of connection with participants. The researcher's position as an 'insider' provides the opportunity to use the self as a key resource and our own experience as a source of information (Voloder, 2008).

Many anthropologists have talked and written about auto-ethnography and many have criticised it. In this research I see auto-ethnography as Strathern (1987, p. 17) describes it: where anthropology is conducted in the context that has produced it. The authenticity of constructs of the self and other in auto-ethnography has been the subject of much scrutiny in anthropology (Reed-Danahay, 1997).

Auto-ethnography welcomes stories and experiences, but this does not mean that I only write what I hear. I also hold the context in mind: in interactions between the interviewees and me, we affect each other through our respective narratives. The approach that auto-ethnography has toward emotion is positive: it encourages researchers to include their own and the interviewee's emotions in the overall presentation.

Although in writing an auto-ethnography I foreground the role of the self in the research, I emphasise that this research is about the stories of others as told through interviews and focus groups on the Internet. Nonetheless, all of this has been in interaction with the researcher. Judith Okely argues that in the academic context 'the personal is theoretical' in the same way that feminists argue that 'the personal is political' (1992, p. 9).

Participant observation

Participant observation (PO) distinguishes anthropology from other social sciences. I used this method from the beginning of my fieldwork. I did the interviews and life histories in later stages, because as Charlotte Davies (1999) points out, they are most effective when relationships with interviewees have already been developed.

PO cannot be made unless the observer has a viewpoint and theoretical interest that directs the observation. Kaplan points out:

We do not observe 'everything that is there to be seen'. An observation is made; it is the product of an active choice, not of a passive exposure. Observing is a goal-directed behaviour; an observational report is significant on the basis of a presumed relation to the goal... Data are always data for some hypothesis or other; if, as the etymology suggest, they are what is given, the observer must have hypotheses to be eligible to receive them (Kaplan, 1998, p. 133).

Even when fieldwork is directed by a theoretical interest, there is still information that is undirected. In other words, what is observed is not only shaped by the interest and theory that is used, but also surrounds it like a penumbra (Holy, 1984).

The larger frame of my methodology is indebted to the interpretive paradigm. With the interpretive paradigm the social scientist does not simply observe things but seeks to understand the meaning of social behaviour for social agents. It means that the social world is not objective, external to people, like other objective existing realities: it is the meaning that constitutes the social world. The social world is not separate from the social meaning that constitutes the social world. Therefore, social facts are not things that can be simply observed (Geertz, 1994).

Holy (1984) highlights the importance of the anthropologist's own experience. He argues that prior to the 1980s, the anthropologist's own experience was absent in monographs of 'native life'. In other words, what the anthropologist understands of his or her own world is taken for granted. Although this experience is absent from the text, it plays a key role in analysing the ethnographic material. Along with the field notes, the experience of the researcher is very important. It allows the anthropologist to explain their data with a different theoretical framework than the one they started their fieldwork with. They can fill in the gaps with their memory because not everything is written down.

I used PO in all the interviews and focus groups I conducted. I also attended many events where Iranians gather and observed how women from different groups practice different schemas of dress code.

I have tried to be self-reflexive, exploring my own interactions and experiences of hijab in relation to the women I have acquainted myself with. I reflect on my own background as an Iranian Shia living in a diasporic context: how, for instance, my own belief on hijab has changed over the last five years while living in London, and how my different background and professional interests influences my choice of hijab. In order to have a productive, processual and multi-perspectival account when analysing the changes of hijab, I have taken into account the tensions between

the similarities and differences that I have with the interviewees in background, class, and so forth.

Interviews

I conducted 40 in-depth semi-structured interviews with women, the process of which I described above. Some of the interviews became closer to a life history, especially in cases where the women experienced a major transition in their dress code. I have also done four interviews with prominent Iranian male clerics and Muslim intellectuals since I noticed in my 40 interviews that the views of these scholars have had a profound impact on many of the hijab transitions experienced in my interviewees. Accessing these prominent public intellectuals was not easy but fortunately, with the recommendation of my father who is their friend, I was able to talk with them via Skype. I have changed all the names of my interviewees for confidentiality except for the four male intellectuals. All interviews were performed in Persian, and I have translated them to English myself.

In semi-structured interviews it is more likely that interviewees will express their views than in standardised interviews and questionnaires (Flick, 2009). This approach allows the interviewer to include a wider variety of questions in order to address more clearly the presuppositions they bring to the interview. Many have often misinterpreted the principle of openness in qualitative research as inspiring an attitude of diffuseness. Generally, in a semi-structured interview, existing knowledge can be disclosed by being stated in the form of answers, and so it is available for interpretation. One problem presented by semi-structured interviews when using subjective theories is in interpreting the data that the researcher has collected, because there are no precise suggestions for how to proceed (Flick, 2009).

Narratives and life histories

In my research, most of the interviews take the form of life histories. The complexities, challenges and dilemmas of women who experience transitions in their dress code are central to this research. Life histories help to interpret their own understandings of their lives and their personal trajectories, especially as these relate to their experiences in London and how they got there.

Life histories are not only about subjective attitudes toward the area being studied. They are also linked to larger tales influenced by global dynamics, historical context, and views about their future (Osella and Osella, 2006). Ellen argues:

The reflective sensibility of individuals about their past and their present actually comprises their culture, since it is the individuals in a society which receive, recreate and transmit the culture over time, and it is their evidence on which the anthropologist, to a greater or lesser extent, relies (1987, p. 248).

I have used this method from the beginning of my fieldwork. I was very open to hearing the life stories of those women who were happy to share them. As many of my interviewees mentioned, the story of hijab is life-changing for Iranians, and has significant complexities and issues around it.

Netnography

Netnography is an online research method coined by Robert Kozinets (2010, 2002). This method is based on ethnography and extends ethnography to the Internet and to online communities. This method is mostly used in marketing research to discover consumer insights. Anthropologists like Miller (2000) have also used this method.

I have used this method in Chapter Three for a newly created Facebook page (less than two years old) called 'no to compulsory hijab' (*na be hejabe ejbari*). More than 43,000 people have liked this page. On this page, Iranians from all over the world, both men and women, send a picture of themselves with a sentence saying that they are against compulsory hijab in Iran. More than 2,000 people have sent pictures, and under each picture there are hundreds of likes and comments that mirror different views about hijab.

During my fieldwork period I followed this page and read all the comments. I saved many of them, and I will use and analyse these data in Chapter Three.

Netnography also involves following the news and reading interviews about hijab that are published on different websites. I have used many of these in different parts of my thesis, especially in Chapter Three, which discusses hijab policies in different periods in Iran and jurisprudential positions on the issue of hijab. Many intellectuals and politicians have made statements and arguments about hijab, and I have accessed these through the Internet.

Focus groups

I held both women-only and mixed-gender group discussions about the issues addressed in my thesis. Because the topic of hijab is something people find very interesting and have strong views about, it was very easy to start group discussions, including informally at events and parties. Both women and men made their points of view known, and with their permission I benefited from many of their insights. However, my research was primarily about the experiences of women themselves and therefore, throughout this thesis, references are only made to the main body of informants who were only women and formed the most important body of this research.

Ethical considerations

In order to respect the privacy of the interviewees, I have changed all their names except the four male *mujtahids*. For confidentiality, I have also blurred some people's faces in the pictures I have used. Those people whose faces are recognisable in the pictures have given their consent for me to leave their photographs untouched. With regards to online data, I have only used information that was available on public pages. The ethical issues around Netnography are different from those of fieldwork. Langer & Beckman (2005) argue that "if access is not restricted, this can be defined as a public communication", thus making it ethically less demanding. The combination of the afore-mentioned methods provided me with the required methodological toolkit for this anthropological research.

Chapter Three: The History and Transformations of Hijab Policies and Hijab Jurisprudence in Iran

Introduction

In this research my central focus is hijab practice in the Iranian diaspora in London. I concentrate on individual hijab practice rather than the macro-level politics of hijab. However, because all of my informants were born in and grew up in Iran, describing the wider history of hijab in modern Iran is essential. This wider context is a part of Iran's general encounter with and experience of a variety of modernity, secularism, and socio-political equality of 'citizens' as a 'universal' phenomenon. In this broader context, one can better understand the dynamics of modernisation/Westernisation and resistance in the case of hijab policies. My research is distinct from other works on hijab because I have worked with women who have lived in both Iran and London. Therefore, I dedicate chapter Three and Four to exploring this wider context, and demonstrating how it has influenced and shaped hijab practice amongst Iranian women.

In what follows I provide a narrative history of hijab policies in Iran since the Constitutional Revolution²¹. Two significant events are milestones of the history of hijab in 20th century Iran: the first is the unveiling order of Reza Shah in 1936 and the second the compulsory wearing of hijab in 1980 after the Islamic Revolution. Both events politicised the practice of hijab and had major effects on the practice and discourse of hijab. The most important implications of these events will be discussed below.

The unveiling order of Reza Shah and the compulsory wearing of hijab in the Islamic Republic of Iran were not necessarily responses to women's demands: they constituted different forms of state-led domination, and were meant to give more power to the powerful (Sadeghi, 2013). After both events, women's situations

²¹ The Constitutional Revolution (*enghelabe mashroote*) happened in 1906 and led to the establishment of Parliament in Iran. This revolution was born out of the tension between the old-fashioned Qajar monarchy and new democratic principles. The constitutional revolution was the turning point for the formation of modern Iran (Chehabi and Martin, 2010).

significantly changed, but not in the way the majority desired. Women at the time of Reza Shah only wanted to remove the face veil, but the government forced all women to wear Western clothes and go out into public without headscarves.

The second part of this chapter covers the evolution of the jurisprudence, or *fiqh*, of hijab. I will explain how it has changed, and also highlight new interpretations of hijab through interviews I conducted with prominent scholars who have written opinions about hijab that differ from mainstream Islamic Shia jurisprudence. These new jurisprudential interpretations, which allow women to wear less and remain devout Muslims, have been an important contributing factor to the increasing transformation of hijab schemas amongst Iranian Shia Muslims in London.

The history of hijab policies in Iran

Hijab has been state-regulated twice in the history of modern Iran. Narratives and interpretations differ according to whether one takes the government's or opposition parties' point of view. In the following sections I will briefly recount the story of hijab from the Constitutional Revolution until today. In understanding the contemporary developments of hijab amongst Iranian women in London, it is important to understand what hijab/veiling and unveiling means in each of these periods.

Hijab prior to the Constitutional Revolution (1905–1925)

The predominant forms of hijab, its meaning, and its socio-cultural significance have been constantly changing in the post-19th century Iran. I therefore clarify what I mean by hijab in each period considered. Houchang Chehabi (2003, p. 203) argues that hijab is not only about using cloth to block the gaze of men: it is also a mode of interaction with a set of rules segregating men and women in visual and behavioural dimensions. The act of covering is called veiling, but the separation between women's and men's spaces is called '*purdah*'. There is no automatic link between veiling and *purdah*, and there are examples of both occurring independently.

Under the Qajars, and prior to the Pahlavi dynasty, hijab for women entailed both veiling and *purdah* between the sexes (in her book (1991), Mernissi challenges this

perception about a universal, all-encompassing ruling on the veil at the time of the Prophet). Women were confined to home, homework and to reproduction. Their hijab consisted of three pieces: *chador*,²² *picheh*²³ and *chaqchur*²⁴ (Sedghi, 2007). Men and women were clearly segregated in most social and religious gatherings and rituals. Women, effectively the dominated gender, were called *zaife*²⁵ (Rice, 1923). Even inside houses, the women's quarters were separate and were kept behind curtains so no stranger could see them (Farmaian and Munker, 1992).

In discussing the early contact of Iranian intelligentsia with the West and the issues of women rights and hijab raised by these contacts, one should not overlook the reform period during the Qajar dynasty before the Constitutional Revolution. After Iran's defeat during the Russo-Iranian wars of the early 19th century, a number of military, administrative, and educational reforms were launched, culminating in the establishment of *Dar al-Fonun*, which involved sending Iranian students abroad for study. A number of 'secular' schools with 'modern' curricula were also established in Iranian cities including Tabriz and Tehran prior to the Constitutional Revolution, preparing the soil for later developments in hijab policies in twentieth century Iran (Afary, 1996; Chehabi, 1993).

Before and after the Constitutional Revolution some Iranians went to Europe for higher education, and on their return home they struggled for women's emancipation from patriarchal power. For example, women started establishing schools and newspapers that published articles opposed to veiling and child marriage. These women were criticised by the traditionalists for being morally corrupt because they endeavoured to emancipate women (Bamdad 2013; Paidar 1997).

²² *Chador* is a long round black fabric that covers from the head to toe. There are different types of *chadors* used by Muslim women in different parts of the world. Illustrations of the Iranian style of *chador* are provided in Chapter 5.

²³ *Piche* was a piece of fabric that women used to cover their face, tied to head with a ribbon. It is not used in Iran today.

²⁴ *Chaqchur* were very loose trousers that women wore to cover from their waist to their toes.

²⁵ *Zaife* derives from the word *zaif*, which means 'weak'. At that time, men used it to address their women.

Pahlavi Dynasty 1925-1979

The Pahlavi Dynasty, which began with Reza Shah, was the first modern state in Iran. The unveiling order (or hijab ban) at this time produced many significant long-term consequences. According to Sadeghi (2013), the most important far-reaching outcome of the unveiling order was the subsequent mandate of compulsory hijab after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The other important outcome of the unveiling order was that it made women the subjects of social class differences. Before the unveiling order, men were the figures who determined the different social classes. There is a very wide literature available on the unveiling order both in English and Persian (Dibaji et al., 2002; Jafari, 1994; Jafarian, 2004; Salah, 2005; Shojaei, 2007).

At the time of Reza Shah, unveiling referred to the abandonment of *chador* and *picheh*. From 1920 onwards, elite women started to unveil in private gatherings, and the use of *picheh* became rare (Ingham, 1977) except in the southern part of Iran where *picheh* is still common (Anjamruz, 1992). In 1927 Sediqe Dowlatabadi, a prominent member of the women's movement, returned from Paris to Tehran and went into the streets of Tehran unveiled, wearing European-style clothing (Paidar, 1997).

In 1928, the Iranian New Year coincided with the anniversary of the murder of Imam Ali (the first Imam of Shia Muslims). Reza Shah's female relatives decided to celebrate both occasions at the shrine of *Hazrati Masume* in Qom. In the shrine, Reza Shah's female relatives wore transparent *chadors*, which led to anger and protest from clerics in Qom. In response, Reza Shah himself drove to Qom and entered the shrine wearing his boots²⁶ as a sign of his anger. He removed the opposing clerics from their positions in the shrine (Qazi, 1993).

In 1932, the journal *Alame Nesvan* published articles and arguments about hijab (Chehabi, 2003). During that same year, the first hints about unveiling began. In the cabinet meeting, unveiling was mentioned as one of the cultural elements that should be imported from the West (Hedayat, 1950).

²⁶ It is customary for people to take off their shoes when they enter shrines and mosques as a sign of respect.

Delshad (1931) discusses unveiling and the experience she had when she started going out and interacting with people without hijab. She felt very good about herself: on one occasion, a shopkeeper called her ‘madam’, demonstrating his respect. She also describes an event she attended with 200 other women: they buried the *chador* and *picheh*, and then all of the women buried their *chadors*, after which they celebrated their freedom and wore Western clothes. Drawing upon this story, Rostam-Kolayi suggests that “the veil was not only a detested symbol of backwardness, but also a barrier to women’s self-respect and self-knowledge” (2003, p. 177).

Reports show that even before the official unveiling order in 1936, there were some elite women who appeared in public without *chador*. Prior to 1927, unveiled women in the streets were detained, but in 1927 the government ordered the police not to interfere with unveiled women (Bamdad, 2013). As a result of unveiling, there was increased interaction between women and men in public spaces such as streets, parks, restaurants, and cafes. After the 1936 unveiling order, the government asked employees to bring their wives unveiled and wearing European-style fashions to official gatherings (Chehabi, 1993).

In 1935, the education ministry announced a new regulation that banned veiled students from receiving prizes. Furthermore, teachers could only claim their salaries if they did not wear hijab (Woodsmall, 1936). People’s reactions to the official banning of hijab varied in different parts of Iran. Some accepted it easily, while others resisted.

After the events at the Gowharshad Mosque²⁷, Reza Shah came to believe it was time to apply compulsory unveiling to all women in the country, although this policy might significantly damage his popularity. His minister suggested that it was better to start by ordering women to put away their *chador* and wear *manto*²⁸ instead, but

²⁷ One of the most tragic incidents during protests against unveiling policies happened in the Gowharshad Mosque in Mashhad. Clerics began talking about unveiling, and meetings were held opposing unveiling in schools. On 13th July 1935, security forces surrounded Imam Reza’s shrine and the Gowharshad mosque and shot all the protesters. They put an end to the refuge, and exiled all the clerics who were involved in the protest (Vahed, 1987).

²⁸ *Manto* is a type of clothing similar to a dress or long tunic that covers the body, has long sleeves, and is loose enough to hide the shape of the body.

Reza Shah did not agree. He wanted Iranian women to dress like women in Turkey, and to work shoulder to shoulder with men in public, just as he had witnessed in person in his recent summer visit to Ataturk's Turkey. Finally, on March 8th 1936, Reza Shah attended a ceremony for the opening of a teacher training college. His wife and two daughters accompanied him unveiled, and all the teachers attending the ceremony were told to come unveiled. Reza Shah's sister and daughter discussed the king's feelings about his wife and family being unveiled in public: it was very hard for him, but he chose to do it because he thought it was an essential part of modernising Iran. In that ceremony, Reza Shah said:

I am exceedingly pleased to see that as a result of knowledge and learning, women have come alive to their condition, rights, and privileges. Being outside of society, the women of this country could not develop their native talents. They could not repay their debt to their dear country nor serve it and sacrifice for it as they should.... We should not forget that [up to this time] one-half of the population of the country was not taken into account... I expect you learned women who are now becoming aware of your rights, privileges and duties to serve your homeland, to be content and economical, and to become accustomed to saving and to avoid luxuries and extravagance (Chehabi, 2003, p. 211).

In order to enforce this unveiling policy, Reza Shah ordered local authorities to monitor women and make sure they were not veiled in public places. For instance, police were stationed at the entrances of bathhouses to prevent veiled women from entering. Prostitutes were not allowed to unveil, so that veiling could no longer be a symbol of virtue (Chehabi, 2003). This is a critical point to consider here. Prior to the ban on veil, it was considered synonymous with modesty and chastity. It seems like an attempt to reverse this by associating the practice of veil with immodesty and depravation. Veiling was seen as the most important factor in the subjugation of women and their seclusion or lack of participation in social life; hence, unveiling was seen as a step towards promoting the social participation of women. It is interesting to note that there is a European ring to this policy which had its parallels

in other Muslim countries (for example, in Egypt). It was not just the state but also the majority of male intellectuals who were seen as flag bearers of progress.

It could be argued that the key factor that convinced Reza Shah to enforce unveiling was his summer visit to Turkey in 1934 (Chehabi, 1993; Jafarian, 2004). In Turkey, Reza Shah was very impressed by women's participation in social life, and the social and economic progress that Turkey was going through under the reign of Kamal Atatürk (Bamdad, 2013).

Reza Shah's unveiling order was supported by a number of prominent male intellectuals, including Kasravi and Taghizade, who were from religious backgrounds themselves and who wrote articles criticising hijab. Although they criticised Reza Shah's dictatorship, they supported his anti-clerical stance on women's rights (Kasravi, 1974; Taqizadeh, 1972). The story of the role of these intellectuals is peculiarly familiar when one compares it with the case of Egypt and the role played by Qasim Amin (Ahmed, 1993), as I have discussed earlier. The only difference is that the ruling power in Egypt was in no way behaving on the same lines as Reza Shah in Iran. Nonetheless, the ideological forces behind such moves are surprisingly aligned, even though there may be differences in details here and there. The key underlying theme in all these policies is that it is a male-dominated, male-driven project heavily under the influence of a Eurocentric mode of viewing Oriental societies. Perceptions about 'Islam' and its presumed role in the degradation of women was part and parcel of this project and they remain in force until our time but with new overtones which are deeply shaped by the geopolitics of our world in contemporary times. It is out of this context and background that the responses and reactions of Shariati and Motahari formed the basis of a rebuttal for asserting an 'Islamic' identity which they believed was not about degradation of women but about their protection and emancipation.

In Iran, two groups primarily opposed the unveiling order. The first group comprised conservative members of the religious sector of society as well as clerics (*ulama*). The second group comprised the majority of women, including educated women, who had accepted covering for centuries. Before the unveiling order, few women went without hijab in public (Jafari, 1994). This was not necessarily due to

religiosity: it was also cultural, and women were not safe in the streets without the *chador*.

Unveiling was perceived as offensive to religious women, because they believed hijab was a sign of virtue, protection, and pride (Moghissi, 1994). It was difficult for hijabi women to unveil because they felt naked without their hijab (Milani, 1992). They therefore stayed at home during the Shah's reign (Reeves, 1989). At that time, houses did not have bathrooms, so hijabi women had to bathe in the middle of night, and travel to bathhouses from neighbours' roofs (Haeri, 1993).

During the Second World War in 1941, allied troops invaded Iran from the north and south, and forced Reza Shah to abdicate. After Reza Shah left Iran, those opposing the unveiling order became vocal. In 1943, Ayatollah Qomi, previously exiled to Najaf after the incident at Gowharshad Mosque, returned to Tehran and offered recommendations to the government. He recommended allowing veiled women to wear whatever they wanted, ceasing building mixed schools, and including Islamic studies in school curricula. After two years, the government accepted the recommendations, and in 1943 the veil officially became a matter of choice (Chehabi, 2003).

Critics of Reza Shah's Unveiling Order

Many academic scholars, including women concerned with gender issues, have criticised Reza Shah for his unveiling order (see Paidar 1997; Nashat 1983; Moghissi 1994; Afary 1996; Sanasarian 1982). They believe that compulsory unveiling was against the will of the majority of women, the most visible sign of which was that after Reza Shah abdicated the unveiling order, many women started wearing hijab again. Scholars argue that it should have been the women's choice to put away the *chador*, not the government, and that Reza Shah did not give women the chance to fight for their rights themselves.

Reza Shah's unveiling policy did not distinguish between veiling (the practice of covering) and *purdah* (the separation of men and women's spaces). He wanted to bring women into the public sphere, and thought this was only obtainable by

unveiling women. One important consequence of the unveiling order was that young girls in religious families were deprived of an education (Najmabadi, 2005).

The unveiling order of that time was not about women's choice and control over their bodies; it was about dismantling the distinction between *andaruni* and *biruni* (inside and outside). The unveiling order was intended to create a different social order; it was not about women's freedom of choice over what to wear (Ahmadi Khorasani, 2011).

After Reza Shah's son Mohammad Reza Shah came to power, many women voluntarily returned to veiling (Sanasarian, 1982). This was partly because religious leaders encouraged women to veil in order to reclaim their previous strength from the state (Paidar, 1997).

The Islamic Republic

After the Islamic Revolution in 1979, there were a series of speeches from the leaders about the Islamic dress code and protests in response. On 7th March 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini announced that women should take part in society and work next to men, but should wear hijab. On 8th March, thousands of women protested against these new policies (Afshar, 1999). Protesters argued that hijab was not necessarily a sign of purity.

The forced marginalisation of this 'secularist' group of women was not non-violent. The secular opposition to the Islamic Republic and their associated women's organisations, who partly organised the demonstration on the 8th of March, were systematically destroyed both politically and physically in a sustained campaign of state violence involving execution and imprisonment (Afary, 1996; Afshar, 1999). This marginalisation of secular women, both at individual and organisational levels, did not stop Iranian secular women and feminists from being highly active in, and occasionally leading, a number of important campaigns for women's rights in post-

revolutionary Iran, including those relating to dress code (e.g. the One Million Signature Campaign²⁹).

From 1979 to 1983, there were several unofficial regulations enforcing the Islamic dress code, especially for women who were government employees. In 1983, an amendment to the constitution made it officially illegal for women to appear in public without hijab. Article 638 of the Iranian penal code, ratified in 1996, stipulated appropriate punishment for improper veiling, including seventy-four lashes, a jail sentence of up to two months, or a fine of 500,000 Rials³⁰.

1982–1998: War and Construction: legal and social consolidation of the compulsion of hijab in public spaces

In the second decade following the 1979 Revolution, women expressed an increasing desire to wear their own style of clothing in public. They were tired of simple and dark-coloured clothing, and wanted to abide by a less strict dress code. They were tired of not being able to express their sexuality. After the Iran-Iraq war, the *basij*³¹ controlled women's dress, and in 1990 protests against *bad hijabi* (bad hijab) spanned multiple cities.

In post-War Iran, Hashemi Rafsanjani's³² daughter made one of the first attempts to liberalise women's dress. She began wearing colourful scarves with a shirt and trousers beneath her *chador*, and advertised women's cycling and sports in the streets of Tehran winning her the second highest votes in Tehran in the 1995 Parliamentary elections.

²⁹ One Million Signatures for the Repeal of Discriminatory Laws is a campaign launched in June 2006 by Iranian feminist activists to collect one million signatures in support of changing discriminatory laws against women in Iran. A number of the leaders and activists of the movement have been jailed by the government, and the campaign has had to extend its two-year target to collect the full one million signatures

³⁰ Today equivalent to 15 US Dollars.

³¹ *Basij* is a paramilitary establishment founded after the Islamic Revolution by Ayatollah Khomeini. It consisted of volunteer civilians who initially joined to take part in the Iran-Iraq war.

³² Hashemi Rafsanjani is one of the most significant political figures of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. He was the president of Iran from 1989 to 1997. He is now the chairman of the Expediency Discernment Council of Iran, and a close ally of Hassan Rouhani.

1998–2006: Reformation in hijab style and the emergence of *bad hijabi*

In 1997, Mohammad Khatami was elected as President of Iran, and the government's policy regarding hijab became less strict. Prior to Mohammad Khatami, the government used violence and cultural propaganda in the struggle against hijab issues. Soon after Khatami's election, governmental hijab policy changed smoothly. A number of high-ranking authorities publicly stated that the younger generation had different demands, and that their needs should be recognised. For example, the *basij* commander announced that the younger generation could not be guided with force and violence. Fateme Rake'ei, a member of the *Mosharekat* political party,³³ stressed that the government was to blame because the function of hijab was not evident to young people (Rake'ei, 2001).

In Khatami's first term (1998-2002), Elahe Kula'ei became a member of parliament. She was the first woman to attain a high governmental position without wearing *chador*. The conservatives who supported stricter and more traditional dress codes for women responded angrily. Elahe Kula'ei's move was seen as controversial because she successfully refused to wear the symbol of Islamic Republic inside parliament itself.

In 1998, Khatami decreed that the government should use polite, legal, and friendly means of dealing with women who do not dress according to Islamic and legal codes, and that the government cannot force everyone to wear the same colour and style of clothing.

In the same year, Faeze Hashemi launched *Zan* (Woman), a newspaper featuring several debates about hijab on topics that included Shariati's and Motahari's interpretation of hijab. In 1999, Ayatollah Janati³⁴ spoke against using black for women's clothing. The President of the 'women's committee and expediency' asserted that Islamic hijab need not only be black *chador*. In 2000, the education ministry announced that girls in primary schools were allowed to wear bright

³³ The largest and most prominent reformist political party in Iran.

³⁴ The chairman of Guardian Council of Iran.

colours for their school uniform, when previously only black, grey, brown, dark blue, or dark green were permitted (Ahmadi Khorasani, 2011).

In 2000, Yousefi Eshkevari³⁵, Elahe Kula'ei and Shahla Lahiji³⁶ criticised compulsory hijab in Iran at the Berlin conference.³⁷ Upon their return to Iran, they were arrested. Yousefi Eshkevari was condemned to 7 years of jail because of his stance against compulsory hijab. In the conference he stated that dress is a customary and cultural issue, that it justifiably varies in different times and places, and that the government has no right to enforce hijab on those who do not choose to wear it (Zakariaei, 2000).

Overall, during the first four years of Khatami's presidency, conservatives did not effectively oppose new policies on hijab. However, they gradually challenged reformists, and used hijab as a means to defeat them. In 2001, previous policies on bad hijab were gradually put back into practice, and a new official moral police formed (*gashte vije mobaraze ba mafasade ejtemayi*)³⁸. This police unit was exclusively mandated to enforce traditional and conservative hijab in public spaces using detainment and force.

Conservatives increased pressure against what they deemed as bad hijab. They believed that it was Khatami's fault that society favoured bad hijab and that Western culture had infiltrated Iranian culture.

2006–2013: Ahmadinejad, neoconservatives, and the 'no to compulsory hijab' campaign

In the middle of the third decade of the Islamic Republic, a new political group of neoconservatives came to power under the leadership of President Mahmoud

³⁵ A reformist cleric in Iran who I will introduce in detail later in this chapter

³⁶ An Iranian writer, publisher and activist.

³⁷ 'Iran after the election conference', also known as the 'Berlin conference', was a consequential three-day conference on the subject of reform in Iran. Some of the participants were imprisoned upon their return to Iran. During the conference, anti-regime Iranian exiles interrupted the proceedings by dancing naked in the middle of the conference chamber.

³⁸ To implement strict control over women's clothing, the moral police placed large vans in crowded squares and social hubs in the public spaces of major cities. Other vans drove around the streets and monitored dress and behavior. Officers would order women with bad hijab to cover properly and detain them if they refused to comply.

Ahmadinejad and his closest partner, Esfandiar Rahim Masha'ei. This new populist conservative group portrayed a new image of the ideal woman—the 'adductive revolutionary woman'—that was more out-spoken and self-governing than the ideal woman traditional conservatives promoted. Traditional conservatives initially supported the new populist and nationalist conservatives, recognising that without them it would be impossible to push reformists aside in the elections. Ahmadinejad, speaking on state TV during his first presidential campaign, declared that the problems with Iran's youth were unrelated to their clothing, or to whether they reveal their hair. As soon as he became president, however, moral police became increasingly strict in controlling women's dress codes in public spaces.

During the first four years of his presidency, Ahmadinejad did not personally take effective action against bad hijab. After the rise of the green movement following the disputed presidential election of 2009, Ahmadinejad and other governmental authorities relaxed control over what women wore. Traditional conservatives pushed for stricter policies and were not at all happy with Ahmadinejad's handling of the matter.

The Arab Spring also softened Ahmadinejad's policies. In the summer of 2011, a special edition of the state-run newspaper (called *khatoon*), published by Ahmadinejad's media advisors, infuriated traditional conservatives to the extent that it was banned. It contained several articles on hijab that explicitly criticised *chador* and the pressure placed on women by the moral police. The edition editor was arrested and sentenced to five years in prison, although his sentence was later commuted to six months.

In the heated dispute on hijab between traditional conservatives and neoconservatives, traditional conservatives accused Ahmadinejad of being lax toward hijab policy as liberals and reformists. Amongst many notable public debates over hijab, Mostafa Tajzade's 2010 letter to Ali Motahari merits mention. Tajzade, jailed after the 2009 presidential election and a member of the *Mosharekat* reformist political party, argued against compulsory hijab. Ali Motahari, a conservative member of parliament, and the son of Ayatollah Motahari responded. The exchange of their open letters attracted a wide readership. Tajzade (2012) criticised

Motahari's assertion that Ahmadinejad's hijab policies resembled the reformists'. In his letter, Tajzade listed the disadvantages of compulsory hijab. The aforementioned discussions and opinions have led to a vigorous debate in the public culture as evidenced in a Facebook campaign.

The 'no to compulsory hijab' Facebook campaign

'No to compulsory hijab' (*na be hejabe ejbari*) is a Facebook page created on 10th July 2012. As of autumn 2013, more than 63,000 Facebook users have liked this page. The aim of this page is to make an effective stand against compulsory hijab in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Many Iranians who live in the London diaspora and other Western diasporic communities are members of this page. The campaign's most effective tool has been asking Iranian men and women to send a photograph of themselves along with a statement opposing compulsory hijab in Iran. These images are posted on the campaign's Facebook page, along with relevant news and interviews.



Figure 2: An Iranian women joining the "No to Compulsory Hijab" campaign Facebook page; 2012.

To date, more than 2000 Iranians have contributed images and statements. I have been monitoring this page since the beginning, and have read all posts, comments, interviews, and news published. The contributed images depict men and women from different age groups following different dress codes, and include many political and social activists inside and outside Iran. Prominent religious intellectuals and Islamic scholars including Mohsen Kadivar (discussed below) are amongst the

supporters, and their images have received the highest number of comments on the page.

It is notable that many women with *chador* have submitted images to the page, along with a significant number of women with hijab. Their pictures receive relatively more comments and 'likes'. This signifies that the demand to lift state restrictions on hijab transcends the religious-secular divide.

Although the hosts of the page and leaders of the campaign have secular and liberal orientations, pictures of women with hijab or that include a religious symbol or the flag of the Islamic Republic of Iran receive more comments and likes, and are the most controversial. Another controversial image that triggered heated debate shows a woman in a bikini saying that she is against all compulsion in dress. The comments clearly demonstrate that there are many ways of perceiving hijab and its limits amongst Iranians both within and outside of Iran.

While every image on this page is interesting and has its own character, I have selected a few examples for discussion.

Posts and comments make it evident that compulsory hijab in Iran is closely associated with Islam in the eyes of members spanning different religious positions. This opinion exists despite historical evidence suggesting that hijab has never been compulsory for all women prior to recent decades(see Mernissi (1991)). Even the Islamic state of the Prophet Mohammad did not enforce hijab for all women. The verses in the Quran on hijab only address practicing believers, and not all women.

The image below shows a man in front of the Kaba³⁹ saying that he opposes compulsory hijab in Iran, although he may or may not personally believe in hijab. Many people have reacted by claiming his beliefs are incoherent.

³⁹ The holiest place in Islam, a large cuboid-shaped building inside the al-Masjid al-Haram mosque in Mecca that Muslims make pilgrimage to.



Figure 3: An Iranian religious man standing in front of the Kaba, the most famous symbol of Islam, joining the "No to Compulsory Hijab" campaign Facebook page; 2012.

Arman commented:

Should I believe the picture or the statement mentioned in it? Islam has explicitly deprived women of their right to choose their dress code. I don't understand this image and slogan. It's all contradiction...

Emad stated:

There is no evidence that compulsory hijab has its roots in Islamic tradition, and it is not right that you relate what the Iranian government is doing with hijab to Islam.

Another user, Mohammad, accused some of the commenters of behaving exactly like the Iranian government, but from the opposite side. He criticised people who believe that everyone should be secular and opposed to hijab or Islam. In his view, this is incompatible with democracy. Arman replied to Mohammad's concern:

Beliefs can only be respected if they are confined to one's personal life. For those beliefs that interfere with other people's lives and affect others' comfort, I have no respect. For example, it is your right to

decide to wear chador, but you are not entitled to oblige others to wear certain clothes or to eat and behave as you wish them to. Most Islamic rules have an impact on other people's lives, and this is unacceptable. I personally do not support beliefs that directly affect nonbelievers' lives.

The picture in Figure 4, below, also triggered a heated debate. It shows that the government has compared women with chocolate in a state-sponsored advertisement on a billboard in Tehran. The sentence below the picture says that hijab is protection. The image treats women as sweets which, without proper cover, will attract flies and contamination. This image exemplifies the typical reasoning behind the government's enforcement of hijab in women. They assume that men are animals who have no control over their desires. If women do not have hijab, men will necessarily transgress and harm women. A number of comments under this image regard it as an insult to both women and men. Here, a Review of the developments of the jurisprudence of Hijab is central in understanding the context and pre-text of these public debates over hijab.



Figure 4: An advertising billboard in Tehran comparing a clean wrapped chocolate with an open one surrounded by insects. "No to Compulsory Hijab" campaign Facebook page, 2012.

History of jurisprudence of hijab in Iran

In this section I survey historical changes of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) in Iran and Shia *fiqh* that relate to hijab. Jurisprudence refers to the study of religious law, and *fiqh* the science of Islamic law. A jurist or *faqih* is a specialist in Islamic law and is eligible to issue Islamic rulings (*fatwas*).

Islamic jurisprudence has had an immense influence on the practice of hijab, especially amongst Shia Iranian women. It is therefore very important to portray the changes that hijab *fiqh* has gone through. In this section I will first give a brief history of ulama's *ijtihad*⁴⁰ on hijab and explain its changes. I will also explicate new juristic positions on hijab based on my interviews with a number of the prominent scholars and *mujtahids*⁴¹ including Kadivar, Eshkevari, Torkashvand, and Fanaei.

Before delving into the history of the jurisprudence of hijab, I need to define a key term: *Marja* (pl. *maraji'*). *Marja'-e taqlid*⁴² (model of emulation) is the most senior position in the contemporary hierarchy of Shia *ulama*. Since *maraji'* are supposed to combine the qualities of learning and reason with those of exemplary devotion and piety, they enjoy the dual role of chief legal authority and spiritual leader/model for the Shia. *Marja*'s office and institutions (*bayt*) are based within a *howza*⁴³.

Marja'iyya in its current form is a relatively recent phenomenon that can be traced back to the nineteenth century. The victory of the *Usuli* School over the *Akhbari* School, new forms of communication, and the print industry are widely seen as the defining factors in the formation of the institution of *marja'iyya* (Kazemi Moussavi, 1994).

⁴⁰ *Ijtihad* is an Islamic term that refers to making religious decisions based on rational deduction from the traditional sources of religious law. *Ijtihad* requires a full knowledge of theology, revealed texts, and legal theory, as well as competence in legal reasoning and a complete knowledge of Arabic.

⁴¹ *Mujtahid* is an Islamic scholar who exercises *ijtihad* and is an expert in interpreting Islamic law. *Mujtahid* exercises *ijtihad* on the basis of Quran, Sunna, consensus (*ijma*) and reason (*aql*). The *muqallids*—that is, lay people who lack specialised religious knowledge—are expected to submit to the judgment of a *mujtahid* in religious disputes. In due course, a hierarchy of *mujtahids* has formed, at the top of which are the *maraji'*. The *muqallids* decide which *marja'* to follow using relatively unclear criteria.

⁴² The Arabic equivalent of the Persian term '*marja'-e taqlid*' is '*al-marja' al-dini*'.

⁴³ A *Howze* is an Islamic Shia centre of learning that educates students in Islamic *fiqh* (jurisprudence). Najaf in Iraq and Qom in Iran are the two leading *howzes* in the Shia world.

All *Marjas* have a *Resale* (A manual of practical rulings on Islamic law) and followers of their own. There are several *Marjas* in Shia Islam, and all have a section in their manuals (*Resale*) on hijab. For many hijabi women, their *Marja's* religious ruling (fatwa) on hijab is the main justification for their personal practice.

Hijab jurisprudence of the Shia Ulama of the early twentieth century

According to Jafarian (2004), before the Constitutional Revolution there was no separate section about women's hijab in the *Resale* of the *Marjas*. As soon as the modernists and Reza Shah began their attempts to fight against hijab, many religious authorities began writing about hijab as a compulsory and essential rule of Islam. It is important to take into account this shift as it clearly reflects the contingency of such rulings. The fact that the ruling was not proactively pursued before the policies of the first Pahlavi ruler is indeed in line with the findings of other scholars such as Mernissi (1991) who deconstruct the argumentations behind the ruling in a more historical context. Previously, all women in Iran had hijab for primarily socio-cultural reasons. Many women spent most of their time inside their homes and did not work with men in public spaces. Hijab, therefore, was not a matter of debate or question. Unlike in *Resales* today, the only rules about hijab in the *Resales* of *Marjas* were in sections devoted to prayer clothes and marriage. This shows that hijab was not an important issue for most Muslims in those days. According to Mir-Hosseini (2011), hijab was predominantly seen as a means of seclusion. One of the often neglected issues about hijab is the issue of class; the connection between observing a special dress code to cover a woman's body and the social class of women deserves attention and as Mernissi (1991), initially the verses about hijab were about the wives of the Prophet. More specifically, it was connected with how aristocratic women were identified in society, rather than being a general rule or condition for religiosity (see, for example, Mernissi 1991, p. 94), nor was it peculiar to Muslim women. The shift from this historically rooted understanding of hijab to a more politically-oriented approach connecting it with piety and religiosity seems quite a later construction as such, as we see in the case of Pahlavi era Iran.

After Reza Shah banned hijab in public, this secondary and much less strict emphasis on hijab gradually changed. Many religious authorities argued that hijab is a

requirement for devout Muslim women. Before the Constitutional Revolution, the dominant discourse on hijab amongst the *Marjas* regarded the whole body of a woman as *awrah*⁴⁴. All the Shia *Marjas* believed that women should cover all parts of the body except the hands and face, and wear clothing loose enough not to show their shape. According to Kadivar, without exception, all traditional Shia jurists saw these as the boundaries of hijab.

The point about a woman's body being considered totally as *awrah* which has very strong sexual connotations in the sense that a woman's totality was viewed in the service of sexual desires warrants further critical assessment. As it appears from the position of the traditional Shia jurists, one might assume that this approach is something integral to the thinking of the jurists. It is indeed far more complicated and much more contextual. The wider social contexts of such rulings is that of a highly male-dominated society in which Shia jurists were only a small part of the larger picture of viewing women as objects of sex and even the property of men. Positions of philosophers such as Nasir al-Din al-Tusi, a medieval Muslim philosopher, is a case in point (see *Nasirean Ethics*, 1964, pp. 161-163).

What is imperative is not to remove Shia jurists from their broader social context as it runs the risk of providing an essentialist view of what Shia jurisprudence is supposed to represent.

Progressive hijab jurisprudence of Motahari

New ideas of hijab formulated by public intellectuals and Muslim scholars like Ali Shariati and Morteza Motahari were amongst the Shia responses to the challenges of modernity in a society that experienced a modern Islamic revolution. After the Islamic Revolution and consequent politicisation of hijab, many Iranian women started to voluntarily wear hijab. Many were influenced by Shariati's discourse on hijab. Shariati claimed that hijab empowers women and helps them to fight against American imperialism. As Mir-Hosseini (2011) states, in Shariati's discourse hijab

⁴⁴ *Awrah* (pudendum) in Islamic *fiqh* refers to the parts of the body that need to be covered in prayer and in front of men who are *namahram*.

became a sign of protest. At the same time, a section of practical rules on hijab was added to all *Resale* of the *Marjas*.

One of the most important milestones in the debate on hijab was Motahari's writing. He composed a book on hijab that became very popular amongst religious women. In his book, Motahari made a big shift in interpreting and defining hijab: unlike his teachers, he did not see hijab as a means of secluding women and excluding women from the social arena, but as a means of protection to allow women to come out and work in society, next to men, protected from any harassment.

Motahari's reformulation of hijab as protection was clearly made to increase women's 'participation' in the social and economic life of the country. In other words, he sought to defend his project of political Islam against secular rivals' charges that Islam confines women to home. Motahari was trying to show that rather than limiting women's participation in public life, hijab facilitates precisely such participation. In other words, Motahari's approach was much more instrumentalist than ideological.

Motahari created a philosophy of hijab that defined hijab as a means of piety and not an end in itself. He created a new stance in the *howze* institutions, and was harshly criticised by his colleagues and teachers. After the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Muslim women found public spaces much safer and the presence of women in civil society increased. The government's policy, following Motahari, was to welcome women into public roles but also to encourage and eventually oblige women to wear Islamic clothing. Many clerics and religious authorities advocated Motahari's views in their talks and writing. Motahari's book on *hijab* is one the most significant and widely read books on the subject, it is referred to by many scholars who have written about hijab in Iran (see Behzadpour 2003; Eshtehardi 1991; Fathi 1991; Jafari Sirizi 2003; Mehdizadeh 2003; Nudyavi & Mofti 2001; Qazi 1993; Saeidi 2002; Shahshahani 1995; Shojaei 2007; Alipour Baghban-Nezhad & Rezaei 2002).

In the approaches of both Shariati and Motahari, the dominant theme is the dichotomy of empowerment vs. protection. Viewing hijab as one or the other in this manner emerged out of a political context to which both Shariati and Motahari

contributed significantly. There was a political ideology to be developed and women were also equally a part of this movement. Both of them, in different ways managed to provide some space and rationale for women to accept their dress code and not to allow it become a barrier for their social and political participation. It must be, however, noted that the broader backdrop of these approaches were not much different from what we saw in Egypt with the radical approaches of people like Qasim Amin. Even though Shariat's position and Motahari's views have critical differences, they both form a mirror image of what people like Taghizade (an in Egypt Qasim Amin, in a radical form) argued. All of these male scholars, jurists or intellectuals provided an argument for or against hijab in the broader contexts of political and social movements which were essentially a product of the colonial legacies.

What needs to be highlighted here is the role of women in the revolution which radically changed the social and political order in Iran. By the time the revolution takes place, education for women was no longer a serious problem. Earlier resistance to modernisation of education at the time of Reza Shah (even though it was not just about women) does not seem to be the major driving factor here. Elements such as class are also secondary to these debates. Women were now part of the movement and often at the forefront of it. A case in point is the role of women in the hostage crisis after the revolution. Masoumeh Ebtekar, who is now among Iranian reformists, was the speaker of the hostage takers then. She was educated in the West and she also represented the revolutionary mode among the women who had contributed to the revolution. People like her were not constrained in their social and political roles either because of lack of access to education or because of class difference. It took women such as Ebtekar years to be in the fold of reformists, as many revolutionaries, from among men and women, during Ayatollah Khomeini's era later joined hands with the reformists. In short, wearing the veil by these revolutionary women (whether they were close to the state or among the followers of Mujahedin), never seemed a barrier. It was indeed a sign of their identity and also contributed to their assertive presence in every sphere of social and political life.

Reformist jurisprudence of hijab: Ghabel, Kadivar, Fanaei, Eshkevari, and Torkashvand

I was very fortunate to be able to interview a number of the most prominent reformist scholars and *mujtahids*. They have worked and published on hijab and have developed new perspectives that differ from those held by the rest of the *mujtahids* in *howze*. These scholars are widely known as religious intellectuals (*roshanfekrane dini*) or religious modernist thinkers (*no-andishane dini*) in Iran.

Most of my informants in London were influenced in their hijab practice by these *mujtahids*, either directly or indirectly. In order to understand my informants, it is therefore essential to discuss this increasingly influential new jurisprudence of hijab.

In this section I will outline each *mujtahid*'s views and indicate how they differ from the hegemonic discourse on hijab in Islamic jurisprudence. I asked these scholars to articulate the limits of hijab according to Shia *fiqh*; whether it is flexible and changeable in different times and places; and about their criticism of hijab in conventional *fiqh*.

Before going into discussion about the views of these scholars, it is necessary to note that the context in which religious intellectuals and the new generation of scholars emerged is deeply political. The aftermath of the succession crisis in the Islamic Republic brought about gradual but significant shifts in the centres of power. In the early years of the leadership of Ayatollah Khamenei, the very concept of the governance of the jurists which was invented by Ayatollah Khomeini became the focal point of intense debates. The very succession was on shaky grounds with the removal of Ayatollah Montazeri as the deputy of Ayatollah Khomeini. What was traditionally known as the Muslim left – followers of the line of Imam – was now in the shadows with little influence in the political domain. The conservatives who were not favourable during the lifetime of Ayatollah Khomeini had now found a powerful supporter in the new leader. The shift in power witnessed the continued marginalisation of figures close to Ayatollah Khomeini until Khatami's victory following eight years of Hashemi Rafsanjani's presidency.

It is during this period when the intelligence and security apparatus begins an intense confrontation with all intellectuals including secular ones to suppress critical and dissenting voices. The crackdown was widespread. It included all secular groups, with all

their differences, groups close to Ayatollah Montazeri (Ghabel and Kadivar were close disciples of Montazeri), feminists of all sorts, and in short any political and social group who challenged the ideological foundations of the newly established order in the second generation of the Islamic Republic's leadership.

The development of the new intellectual discourse happens in this context and it is not simply about issues of women. The new leadership's grip on power included every sphere of the social and political life of Iranians. Intellectual and political responses, reflections and revisiting of the direction of the revolution takes place in this context. A recent and thorough evaluation of various economic, political and intellectual contexts and contingencies of these changes are briefly and meticulously covered in a chapter by Ali Paya (et al) in Estes and Tiliouine (2016, pp. 211-235).

Ahmad Ghabel

In contemporary Shia Islam, several Shia *Marjas* have their own followers. As Kadivar mentioned, apart from Ahmad Ghabel, all other *Mujtahids* and *Marjas* in Shia Islam believe that women should cover all parts of their body except their hands and face. Ghabel, who lived in Qom, was the first contemporary *mujtahid* to announce that covering one's head and neck is only *mustahab*⁴⁵ (recommended) and not *vajeb* (compulsory). He supported his view using evidence from within traditional *fiqh* to demonstrate that women are permitted to show their neck and hair but are still obliged to cover the rest of their bodies. I planned to interview Ahmad Ghabel, but unfortunately he died from a brain tumour during my fieldwork in 2012, so I was unable to talk to him in person. However, several of his publicly available interviews and articles on the topic of my research allow me to include him in this discussion.

Ghabel was the first and only contemporary prominent *mujtahid* to state publicly that covering the hair and neck is not compulsory (*vajeb*) for women in Islam. All

⁴⁵ In Islamic law there are a number of key essential terms, which the jurists use to explain the permissibility of a certain action by Muslims. *Mustahab* is one, which means recommended or favored but not obligatory or compulsory. *Haram* refers to those acts that are completely forbidden (like lying or drinking alcohol). *Vajeb* is an act that is compulsory for Muslims (like praying five times a day and fasting during Ramadan).

my interviewees amongst the Qom-educated scholars confirmed that there have been other clerics and religious experts who hold similar views, but they have not declared it publicly.

What is quite pertinent to note here is that Ghabel was a disciple of Ayatollah Montezeri and after the 2009 disputed presidential elections, he was among the most vocal supporters of the Green Movement and spent a long time in prison. Even though his views about women's dress code had emerged before the Green Movement, the political context which gave rise to the Green Movement was still there. People like Ghabel were operating and producing their work in that context.

Amir Torkashvand

Amir Torkashvand is a cleric in Qom who has conducted in-depth research on the limits of hijab at the time of the Prophet Mohammad, although he does not use this research to generate normative prescriptions for contemporary society. In his thousand-page monograph (*hijabe shari dar asre payambar*) he shows that at the time of the Prophet Mohammad it was compulsory for women to cover from their collarbone to their knees. The rest of their body, including their arms, were not necessary to cover. Though Torkashvand does not personally draw conclusions from his investigation for Muslim women today, he still has affected how women—including a number of my educated interviewees and I—perceive hijab. For most Muslims, the Prophet Mohammad's acts are the source of right action (hence the issue of authority and who is to be obeyed). Therefore, after being convinced by Torkashvand's argument, women conclude that if the Prophet did not want women to cover their hair in a much more traditional society, Muslim women in contemporary societies that have become much more egalitarian are also allowed to uncover their hair, in accordance with progressive Islamic Shia jurisprudence.

The difference between Torkashvand and Ghabel is that Torkashvand is not visibly aligned with reformists. Even though, there is not any indication which to show his explicit sympathies with the reformist political and intellectual direction, his views about the veil are fully in line with the same approach as promoted by reformists.

Torkashvand's book, *Hijab in the time of Prophet Mohammad (hijabe shar'ei dar asre payambar)* has become very controversial in Iran's public sphere, and amongst religious scholars within and outside of Iran. It is the first book in Persian that has exclusively talked about hijab practice and its features at the time of Prophet Mohammad, and it draws conclusions that are totally different from the mainstream jurisprudence of hijab in Shia Islam.

According to Torkashvand, there are three different views on the meaning of the word *awrah* (see footnote 45) in Shia *fiqh*. The first view is the most popular and dominant, and is approved by the majority of the *ulama*. In this view, *awrah* in men is the part between their knee and navel, and for women it refers to all parts of the body except for the face and hands. A number of *marjas* believe the foot can also be shown.

The second view, which Torkashvand called the 'original view', is in his opinion the correct view about the limits of *awrah* for both men and women. In this view, *awrah* for men refers only to the middle part (the genitals), and for women it refers to the part of the body between the shoulders and the knees. According to this view, covering the rest of the body—the head, neck, arms, and knee to foot—is not compulsory. The third view that Torkashvand mentioned is that *awrah* for both men and women is the same and refers only to the genitals. This view is not very well known, and there is very little evidence for it.

Torkashvand emphasised that what he has discussed in his book only relates to the time of the Prophet Mohammad, and he does not want to prescribe anything for how women should practice hijab today. At the same time, he said:

Although I do not claim that I am giving a prescription for women today on how they should cover, we should keep in mind that all the ulama and marjas think that the sharia law is based on what Prophet Mohammad did in his time, and that the Islamic laws of our time are the same as those of the Prophet's time. One cannot make any conclusions based solely on this book that I have written, and there are many other views available. It is the responsibility of a marja to

take all these views into account and give guidance to his followers.

I hope my research can pave the way for them.⁴⁶

Anyone familiar with Islamic jurisprudence will know that it is meaningless to believe that Prophet Mohammad did not ask women to cover their hair and head, and at the same time to believe that covering head and hair is compulsory for Muslims in contemporary societies. I suggest that Torkashvand's hesitation to state clearly that Islamic hijab did not and should not include covering the head and the hair stems from conservative pragmatic concerns. Publicly taking such a stance in Iran could turn out to be very costly for him, as it did in the case of Eshkevari and Ghabel (who were both sentenced to prison and banned from wearing the official dress of Shia clerics in public).

Since most Muslim women wear a scarf, one might assume that the statements about hijab in the Quran or the *hadith* refer to the type of hijab we see amongst women today. But according to Torkashvand, this is not always the case. The words that the jurists use to refer to head-coverings had different meanings at that time. It is the researcher's responsibility to find out what those words meant at the time of Prophet Mohammad. For example, Torkashvand states that the headscarf, which is used to cover all hair today, did not have the same function at the time of Prophet Mohammad. At that time, the function of headscarf was to provide protection from the sunshine: it covered the head but some hair was exposed. Torkashvand (2010) argues that at the time of the Prophet Mohammad, the scarf was a sign of social class, prestige, and privilege, rather than an act of religious devotion.

In Torkashvand's view, we cannot conclude that today's conventional hijab is *vajeb* (compulsory) based on the Quran and *hadith*. He provides historical evidence for all the claims he makes. His outstanding book is a turning point for views on hijab, and it is different from all other works that have been published by someone coming from *howze*. Because the writer has lived all his life in Iran and is from a religious background, his novel work has become more influential amongst religious and pious Iranians. The book did not receive permission to be published in Iran. The PDF

⁴⁶ Interview with Amir Hossein Torkashvand 16/1/2013

file, however, was distributed widely on the Internet, and it has received many comments and both positive and negative feedback. Personally, reading this book was a turning point for my own view on hijab, and it was one of the main inspirations for this research.

Interestingly, all the *mujtahids* I interviewed that hold different views about hijab compared to the rest of the jurists have experienced living in a Western country. In my view, this has allowed them to see the issue of hijab from the perspective of lived experience and multiple contingent perspectives. In the case of Ahmad Ghabel, he spent a long time outside Iran in Tajikistan. Tajikistan is a country with a majority of Muslim population where 'Islamic' laws do not define the dress code of women. In this sense, Ghabel was also exposed to how religiosity of women could be related to their dress code.

Abul-Ghasem Fanaei

Fanaei is a prominent and influential Iranian Muslim intellectual who is both a Qom educated *mujtahid* and a moral philosopher. He graduated from the University of Sheffield in the United Kingdom. He has been a close friend, and during the past five years we have discussed many hijab-related issues in detail. I interviewed him twice specifically for this thesis.

As I mentioned earlier, religious authorities give their *fatwa*⁴⁷ on hijab on the basis of the Quran and the *Sunnah* (tradition). Fanaei argues that one cannot conclude that hijab meant covering the whole body except for the hands and face in all places and times on the basis of two verses in the Quran. According to Fanaei, the hijab verses in the Quran have two connotations. Firstly, they ask practicing Muslim believers not to show off (*tabarroj*) to attract the sexual attention of men other than their

⁴⁷ *Fatwa* is a technical term meaning the jurist's legal judgment on specific topics in Islamic jurisprudence.

mahrams.⁴⁸ Secondly, they articulate that hijab's main function is to protect women from men's harassment and to keep them safe when they go outside.

Both connotations lead to the conclusion that hijab cannot mean the same thing in different times and places. For example, if you are in Spain, wearing a bikini by the sea might not be seen as showing off or be a danger to women's safety. In other places, not wearing a scarf could make women stand out and also make them unsafe. Therefore, unlike most Shia jurists, Fanaei believes that hijab does not have a fixed and inflexible limitation, and that people who live in different parts of the world can have different ways of practicing hijab. He asserts that we cannot label hijab as one predefined mode of covering.

Another important hijab-related idea Fanaei mentioned was on the topic of Motahari's discourse on hijab. Fanaei believes that Motahari's discourse on hijab was very different from that of his predecessors in *howze*. Before Motahari, jurists saw hijab practice as a devotional act that should not be questioned but only obeyed. Motahari, in contrast, introduced a new interpretation of hijab in which, instead of a devotional practice, hijab was seen as a rational practice serving positive moral and social goals. Fanaei regards Motahari's discourse on hijab as an essential springboard for a new understanding of hijab with important consequences:

The first consequence of seeing hijab practice as a rational act and talking about the philosophy of hijab, as protection is that Motahari indirectly says that hijab is not an end itself. It is a mean to an end. Therefore if we see hijab practice as covering the whole body except hands and face as a mean to the end of having protection, this could change in a different context. The second consequence of Motahari's discourse of hijab as protection and not limitation is that in other parts of the world it could be the other way around. For example, it might not bring protection for women in the United States, and even this form of hijab could be a limitation for them. Thirdly, if we accept Motahari's philosophy of hijab, the form of hijab should vary in

⁴⁸ *Mahrams* include a woman's husband and all male relatives with whom marriage is forbidden i.e. father, son, brother, uncle, father-in-law, nephew, grandfather, etc.

different times and places, and it should be a woman's own decision what to cover and how to cover in order to be comfortable and protected. For example, in London if you wear something which is not called Islamic, you still are protected.

Another consequence of seeing hijab, as protection is that wearing it is a right for women and not a duty, unlike what we have in Shia fiqh, which says that hijab is a duty compulsory for all Muslim women. According to the points I raised, seeing hijab as protection can have many consequences that can transform the actual shape of hijab practice in Shia fiqh.⁴⁹

A number of scholars have argued that hijab practice is empowering for women, as they are not then seen as sex objects (Bullock, 2002; Kariapper, 2009; Mahmood, 2004). Viewing the lack of veil as being directly related to the sexual objectification of women presents a problem here. What is very critical to note here (and as we shall see, traces of it can also be found in Fanaei's approach) is the male-dominated mentality. Therefore, correlation of empowerment with veiling is yet again problematic here if it fails to take into account the mode of knowledge production which gives life and direction to this debate.

According to Fanaei, hijab practice in Shia *fiqh* and *Hadith* does not mean that they have promoted women from sex objects to individuals with equal rights. Fanaei believes that what is in the *Hadith* makes women available only for their husbands, and the status of women remains the same. The Quran and *Hadith* are 1400 years old. According to him, by pre-modern standards, they could even be seen as feminist approaches in that context. However, he believes that *ulama* have still remained the same, and that one cannot claim that the hijab rule in *fiqh* is empowering for women in the modern world. Fanaei further mentioned that hijab verses in the Quran only

⁴⁹ Interview with Abul-Ghasem Fanaei 8/4/2013

address practicing believers (*momenun*) and not all women in Islamic countries. Obviously, not all members of a society are practicing and pious believers.

There are two points to be made here, in the context of what Fanaei suggests. The first one is the issue of 'availability' of women. This idea is closely connected to a woman's body and the sexual aspect of her life. The perception beneath this approach is that a veiled woman is indeed restricting her sexual availability by way of wearing the veil. If indeed any woman can set her bodily and sexual boundaries in different forms not only through the veil, the point about availability becomes moot and the veil itself would then be nothing more than an element to assert an identity. The next point is yet again about connecting this dress code with faith: a woman who is addressed in such a manner is categorised among 'practicing believers'. There is a very strong assumption here that being a believer and being a 'practicing' one is closely tied to dress code. The male mentality of the jurists cannot yet envisage a woman who can assertively choose to veil or unveil (in various degrees) but keep her modesty and ethical integrity. Being practising seems to be interrelated to wearing the veil for a woman while it does not ever seem a factor for the assessment of a man's faith. This subtle point reflects how even in progressive forms of jurisprudence traces of the same mentality, albeit in much less aggressive forms, persist.

Nonetheless, we must bear in mind that compared to more restrictive approaches, Fanaei's views provide more space for Iranian women. These ideas distance Fanaei from mainstream Shia jurists. Fanaei's discourse has already influenced many Iranian women in London. The growing readership of works by Fanaei and related scholars promises to spread these ideas on hijab amongst hijabi women in Iran. Fanaei lives in the UK and gives regular lectures at *Mahfel Vali*, a centre for Muslim Iranians in London, which I described in detail in Chapter Four.

Mohsen Kadivar

Kadivar is one of the most prominent and influential Muslim intellectuals of Iran. As a *Mujtahid* educated in Qom, he wears the traditional clerical clothing (*aba va ammame*). He has conducted extensive research on hijab and has published articles

on this subject. A number of my interviewees in London asserted that their practice of hijab had been influenced by his writings, so I arranged to interview him.

In his articles on hijab, Kadivar talks about the various sources of the hijab rule in *fiqh*, and explores each of them in detail (Kadivar, 2012). According to Kadivar, there are two types of *ijtihad*. The first type is ‘traditional *ijtihad*’ upon which the current *howze* system of education and *Marjas ijtihad* is based. The second type, which Kadivar supports, is ‘*ijtihad* in principles and fundamentals’. Both types of *ijtihad* have been used to issue *fatwas* on hijab. According to traditional *ijtihad*, dominant in Shia *fiqh* today, hijab means covering all parts of the body except for the hands and face. Kadivar asserted that all contemporary senior *Marjas* have issued this *fatwa* on the basis of traditional *ijtihad*. They believe that the Quran functions exactly like a book of law, and that whatever it says applies in the same way at all times and places.

On the other hand, those (like Kadivar himself) who believe in *ijtihad* in principles and fundamentals do not see the Quran as a book of law, but as a source or reference for jurisprudential reasoning. According to this type of *ijtihad*, what is written in the Quran is not necessarily applicable at all times and places. A “cultural transition” that remains loyal to the spiritual objectives and teachings of the Quran is needed. For example, the verse allowing men to have more than one wife might not be applicable to contemporary Muslims. At the time of the Prophet Mohammad, this rule actually limited men, compared to the sexual freedom they enjoyed before becoming Muslim. It was a step forward, making sexual relationships more moral and just. This does not, however, mean that today men should still be allowed to have more than one wife. Today, moral jurisprudence of relationships and marriage requires men not to have more than one wife. The status of women at the time of the Prophet Mohammad was enhanced by these rules, but the religious authorities have still remained in the same place as they were 1400 years ago (as Kadivar says), and they present an Islam that is criticised for being incompatible with women’s rights. I would like to add one more qualification to this claim. Indeed, religious authorities may have moved away from 1400 years. If we look at Mernissi (1991) and Amer (2014), we can visibly see that, religious authorities have actually added further

restrictions that really did not exist in the tribal and patriarchal community of the time of the Prophet. This shift is primarily due to socio-political shifts.

According to Kadivar, there is a specific minimum limit of covering for all Muslim women in all places and times, be that today, 100 years ago, or in the future. Torkashvand argued that at the Prophet Mohammad's time it was compulsory (*vajeb*) to cover from the neck to the knees, and on the basis of this argument, Kadivar believes that the minimum boundaries of hijab remain the same. Women must cover from the neck to the knees. Depending on context, the rest of the body should also be covered to the degree necessary to remain protected and modest. It is not always necessary to cover one's head. For example, he mentioned that it might not be necessary for Muslim women who live in Western countries to cover their heads, because wearing a scarf is not common. The argument revolved around the point of making women stand out in a society whose norms are different. By standing out as a result of a difference in dress code, following the line of Kadivar's argument, they would attract more attention to them which would compromise their 'protection' as such.

Kadivar believes that traditional *ijtihad* cannot lead to any *fatwa* on hijab other than what we have in our mainstream *fiqh* today. He even criticised Ahmad Ghabel's *ijtihad* on hijab practice because, according to him, Ghabel had issued this *fatwa* within the framework of 'traditional *ijtihad*'. Kadivar does not consider Ghabel's argument (which is based on *hadiths* on hijab for praying [*setre salati*]) to be strong. Kadivar argues that in order to present new interpretations of hijab in *fiqh*, one should work within the realm of '*ijtihad* in principles and fundamentals'. He asserted:

*I agree with the outcome of Ghabel and Torkashvand's view on hijab, but I do not approve of their process and reasoning because it is based on traditional ijtihad. In this case, one should start by introducing a new discourse on the equality of women and men, based on which new fatwas can be issued on hijab.*⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Interview with Mohsen Kadivar 9/5/2013.

In general, Kadivar believes that the limit of covering for hijab varies from time to time and place to place. At the time of the Prophet Mohammad, hijab was a privilege for Muslim women, to protect them from men's harassment. Today, women everywhere might not need it to be protected (through placing limitations on their dress code). He stated that women could cover only the essential parts (from neck to knee) in places where it is neither uncommon nor unchaste to uncover the head and hair. Otherwise, it is better for women to cover their head when the norm of the society is to cover.

As we can see even in the case of Kadivar, hijab is not seen as neutral issue. It forms the centre of all debates about women. Jusrists such as Kadivar and Ghable keep debating about the limits of it. It is about making it more flexible and more conducive to the new contexts in which these women are living. The fact that this concern about women's dress code is inherently related to modesty and ethical values poses a challenge that even though people like Kadivar and Ghable have taken significant steps to surpass, they still seem reluctant to confront the problem head on.

Hassan Yousefi Eshkevari

Eshkevari is also a prominent reformist Iranian cleric, intellectual and *mujtahid*. Eshkevari was the first cleric to publicly critique compulsory hijab at the Berlin conference (2000). This led to his imprisonment after returning to Iran. He has also published several articles on topics related to the hermeneutics of Islam and differing interpretations of Islamic law, including on hijab.

His view on hijab⁵¹ can be summarised in three main separate but interconnected points. First, he believes that we should determine whether hijab is justified on the basis of the Quran. After scrutinising all words in the Quran that relate to hijab and evaluating their meaning at the time, he found that the common use of hijab in Shia *fiqh* was not based on Quranic evidence. Eshkevari believes that we cannot attest that covering the head is *vajeb* (compulsory) based on the Quran.

⁵¹ By hijab, Eshkevari means covering everywhere except for hands and face, and he uses the term particularly when referring to covering the hair and neck.

Secondly, even if, for the sake of argument, we were to assume that the common interpretation of hijab is based on the Quran, it would nonetheless not be a fixed and unchangeable law. In order to elaborate this point, Eshkevari said that Islamic law has two different types of laws. The first are 'devotional laws', like daily prayers, fasting and pilgrimage to Mecca. The second are 'social laws', like laws about inheritance, slavery, marriage, war, hijab, and many others. Social laws have changed in different times and are not fixed in the same way that devotional laws are. He believes that hijab law is a 'social law' and not a 'devotional law', meaning that it can change from period to period and place to place, regardless of how it was described in the Quran.

Thirdly, even were hijab both based on Quran and a devotional or unchangeable Islamic law, there is absolutely no Islamic basis to believe that one has the right to compel others to observe the law by force, as the current Iranian government does. Eshkevari states that he is committed to the principles of Islam, and at the same time he believes that many Islamic laws like hijab are changeable. He mentions six reasons in his human rights article (Eshkevari, 2010) to argue that the social laws of Islam can change.

Eshkevari emphasised that we should justify hijab rationally. In his view, there are at least two important reasons for hijab: firstly, the requirements of the virtue of modesty, and secondly, requirements of identity. According to him, the issue of identity falls outside the realm of religion, and modesty does not necessarily require covering the head and neck. It can be achieved differently in contemporary societies—especially in places like Europe, where the headscarf is not common. Unlike many jurists, he believes that a woman can be modest and at the same time not cover her hair. As we can see here, Eshkevari engages with the issue not simply in jurisprudential terms but also in more rational terms. The issue of the veil in and by itself does not seem to signify anything integral to a woman's religious practice or faith here.

Eshkevari also mentioned that the work Torkashvand and Ghabel have done on hijab is very valuable and novel. He said:

While I was in prison because of the Berlin Conference, Ahmad Ghabel spoke out about his view on hijab. Ghabel believed that covering the head and neck is not vajeb (compulsory) for Muslim women: it is only mustahab⁵². I told him: "I only criticised the compulsion of hijab by the government, and not the rule of hijab itself, and they wanted to execute me for it, so imagine what they will do to you!" Ahmad Ghabel laughed and said, "People like you have paved the way for us."⁵³

Conclusion

In this chapter, I described the broader historical context of hijab in Iran, in order to understand how the concept and practice of hijab has changed over time. The two most significant turning points—Reza Shah's unveiling order and the compulsory hijab after the 1979 revolution—have had the most profound implications on women's hijab in Iran. A number of scholars (including Sadeghi, 2013) have gone so far as to claim that the second transformation was an unintended consequence of the first.

Neither the unveiling order of Reza Shah nor the compulsory hijab after the 1979 Revolution responded to the demands of the majority of Iranian women. Both developments significantly changed the situation for women, but not as chosen by women themselves. These policies were, in practice, imposing male domination and structuring power relations.

A noteworthy unintended consequence of the second transformation (compulsory hijab in post-1980 Iran) has been the rise of a new stream of Shia scholars who have re-interpreted and re-examined the jurisprudential evidence for the limits of hijab. But as I noted earlier, these new responses were not only with regard to hijab; there were more complex socio-political factors at stake which were closely connected with shifts in the power structure of Iran's politics. It is in this context that some

⁵² See note 44

⁵³ Interview with Hassan Yousefi Eshkevari 29/4/2013

clerics now argue that covering the head and hear is not *vajeb* (compulsory) in the Islamic law.

Mohsen Kadivar, Hassan Yousefi Eshkevari, Abul-Ghasem Fanaei, and Amir Torkashvand, all of whom I interviewed for this thesis, are the most prominent figures in this new stream of revisionism in Shia hijab jurisprudence. What remains to be noted here is that none of these scholars actively or explicitly identified with feminism or even Islamic feminism, but as we can note in the works of Iranian feminists, there is an overlap between the arguments and position of these scholars and those of Muslim feminists. The overlap has not resulted in an explicit alliance or convergence in the public and social space of Muslim reformist jurists and scholars and Muslim feminists as such. One of the reasons is probably due to the climate in which secular Iranian feminists monopolise some of the avenues identified for women's rights. But, be that as it may, the fact remain that this convergence is not explicit and clear. Not yet.

The new wave of Islamic feminism in the jurisprudence of hijab has had a major effect on the choice of hijab for many of the interviewees in this research, and understanding it is an essential part of understanding their motivations and experiences. But I have not been able to identify women among them. What is viewed by a version of 'Islamic feminism' seems to be referring to the different views of these scholars and jurists rather than an emerging repertoire of Muslim women's voices themselves.

Chapter Four: The Iranian Diaspora in London

The phrase ‘Iranian diaspora in London’ describes a wide variety of people who have migrated to London at different times and for different reasons. In this chapter, after examining the use of the term ‘diaspora’, I describe the Iranian community centres that I engaged with and that my informants attended most frequently. I explore the implications of this discussion for my ethnographic fieldwork as well as the common features that the diaspora communities share in their treatment of hijab and their opinions on its compulsory use in Iran after the 1979 Islamic revolution.

The meaning of the word diaspora varies strikingly depending on historical context. According to Helly (2007, p. 3), the term ‘diaspora’ originally meant loss, or being cut off, and it had a negative connotation. After Jews settled in Palestine, the meaning of the word changed to encompass the gathering of all Jews in one place. In the nineteenth century, with the establishment of the nation state, the term ‘diaspora’ again took on a negative connotation, signifying exile and displacement (Marienstras, 1989), because a nation state implied the superiority of an ethnic group (Helly, 2007). According to Tololyan (1996), after 1970 the term ‘diaspora’ referred to a population living outside their homeland. After 1980, diaspora had a positive implication, and it was used to define all forms of migration of different communities.

Regarding the definition of diaspora, Helly argues that:

The term diaspora seems to embody the fate of a number of non-European individuals who have emigrated to or been displaced to the Western world, as it overlooks national borders and evokes an experience of victimization, the will to endure, and a strong sense of solidarity. (Helly, 2007, p. 5)

Early uses of the term ‘diaspora’ conveyed a mix of forced and voluntary migration that Nicholas Van Hear characterises as follows:

First, the population is dispersed from a homeland to two or more territories. Second, the presence abroad is enduring, although exile is

not necessarily permanent, but may include movement between the homeland and a new host. And third, there is some kind of exchange—social, economic, political, or cultural—between or amongst the spatially separated populations comprising the diaspora. (1998, p. 6)

The diaspora is characterised by the political, social, and cultural connections formed through the intersection of spaces: the place of residence and the place of origin (Kalra et al., 2005, p. 2).

Perhaps the description that Karim H. Karim (2003) provides is a little more nuanced in this regard:

‘Diaspora’ is derived from the Greek diaspeirein , which suggests the scattering of seeds. The term has traditionally referred to the Jewish dispersal outside Israel but is now applied to a growing list of migratory groups. Research on diaspora is conducted from numerous academic perspectives including anthropology, sociology, human geography, migration, culture, race, multiculturalism, postcolonialism, political economy and communication. (2003, p. 1)

There are at least two approaches to using diaspora as a concept in the social sciences. One approach is to treat the term as a descriptive tool that is useful for categorization and its implications. The other is to treat diaspora as a process, and to criticize the essentialism involved in the categorical approach (Kalra et al., 2005). My approach to the Iranian diaspora in London combines the two approaches above. I find the term descriptively useful, but believe it is essential to break through conventional views of diaspora and its features.

The majority of research on the Iranian diaspora has taken place in USA, Germany, Turkey, Canada, Japan and Australia (see Bafekr & Leman 1999; Kamalkhani 1998; Bauer 1991; Harbottle 2004; Nassehi-Behnam 2000). Literature on the Iranian diaspora in London is sparse (but see Spellman 2004; Mcauliffe 2007; Sreberny 2000). Academic work on the Iranian diaspora covers different topics that are relevant to the process of adaptation and to identity issues in the host culture (see

Kamalkhani 1998; Sreberny 2000; Ansari 1988; Harbottle 2004; Biparva 1994; Kelley & Friedlander 1993; Chaichian 1997). A number of studies on diasporic communities in Western countries show that religiosity is heightened by the process of immigration (see Bruce, 1996; Halliday, 2003; Mandel, 1990).

Origins of the Iranian Diaspora in London

According to Spellman (2004) the first wave of Iranian immigrants came to the United Kingdom before the 1979 Islamic revolution primarily to undertake higher education. A second wave of immigrants arrived after the Islamic revolution. These individuals were either forced to leave Iran, or left voluntarily because of the regime change. Many Iranians in this group came to London for work or higher education; however, some came to the UK and stayed as refugees.

Spellman specifies that there were at least three groups who came out of Iran after the Iranian revolution that are part of the Iranian diaspora in London. The first is the Monarchists, composed of individuals who supported the Shah's regime and were primarily members of the Shah's government, members of the military, or bankers. This population is currently mostly located in the USA. The second group were Mujahedin who opposed the Shah's regime ten years before the 1979 revolution. After the revolution they were suppressed by the clerics. In 1981, Mujahedin started an armed struggle against the new Islamic Republic and assassinated many leaders of the revolution. The third group is made up of leftist groups like the *Tudeh* party that were established long before the revolution and were also suppressed by the authorities because of their Marxist tendencies. Spellman's research into the diaspora is, however, much more comprehensive as she covers various other groups which do not fit into any of these categories. These groups include different Sufi orders (2004, pp. 103-146) and converts to Christianity (2004, 147-206). In her work, Spellman focusses on the functions of various religious and cultural rituals that the diasporic Iranian communities in London are involved in, including those of the Baha'is, Zoroastrians, the Shahmaghsoudi Sufi order and the Armenians.

Spellman's typology is useful, but is not concerned with issues of dress code in the direct and specific manner that I am doing in this research. The groups discussed are not the focus of this research. My informants are drawn from a different group that I describe in detail in the section on Iranian diaspora in London.

The way diasporic communities in London relate to issues of modernity and secularism shapes the kind of approaches one may have to the issues of practicing Islam or finding it integral to one's identity. In the section below, I provide a critical reading of Reza Gholami's recent work which deals with the secularity of the Iranian diaspora and the new concept he proposes for assessing the situation.

The 'Islamicness' of Diasporic Communities

The presence of Muslims in 'secular societies' presents a challenge to the moral world they inhabit. Concerns about preserving or maintaining the moral constitutions of their lives, has further pushed Muslim communities in the diaspora, not necessarily in lesser ways than those at home, to re-negotiate and re-assess their ways or relating to the cosmologies, epistemologies and peculiarities of their religious and cultural backgrounds.

The case of Iranian Muslims in Britain, and in particular that of Iranian Muslim women in London, is closely connected to how 'secularism' and 'secular' concepts or values are viewed, challenged or aligned with their religious affiliations. In his study of Muslim Iranian diasporic communities in Britain, Reza Gholami (2014, 2015) looks at the case of Shi'a Iranian Muslims and proposes a new concept in order to make sense of how these diasporic communities make sense of challenges of a secular society. Gholami coins the term "non-Islamiosity" to capture what he considers a new sphere of interaction with secular societies. Gholami's research is based on a case study of Shi'a Iranians whose boundaries of religious and national identities often blur or seem blurred in the research he has conducted.

In his earlier work (2014), Gholami describes two angles of approaching the issue: one which "often antagonistically polarises 'the secular (West)' and 'diasporic Muslims'" and the other "acknowledges that some Muslims are 'cultural' or

‘secular’ and studies how they often (but to varying degrees) negotiate, sometimes strategically, between their religious/cultural and other (secular) identities” (Gholami 2014, p. 61).

Gholami’s point of departure rests in very broad definitions of both secularism and Islam. In describing ‘secular’, he suggests that it “refers to modern discourses, knowledge and sensibilities rooted in European Christendom which define, problematise and redefine ‘religion’” (p. 61). Unlike Gholami’s rather linear narrative of secularism, Zubaida (2011) is more detailed and theoretically more nuanced. Zubaida, unlike Gholami, identifies the connections between secularism, capitalism in Western Europe and its institutions:

New institutions and practices, products of modern economic and technical developments, of transport and communication, media, sports, arts and entertainment, all arose without reference to religion or its institutions. This is a process that many historians and sociologists have called ‘secularization’. (Zubaida 2011, pp. 2-3)

This approach is, of course, clearly different from the way Gholami contextualises the case of diasporic communities. Instead of redefining ‘religion’ as such, the general direction of secular tendencies is to marginalise or eliminate any reference to religion and God in the public sphere. In reality, of course, it doesn’t happen in such clear-cut terms, though. Gholami, however, continues to argue that the common perceptions he refers to are not sufficient for understanding what he calls “Muslim modes of secularism” (p. 61).

One of the important contributions of Gholami’s work is how he suggests the idea of multiple secularism even though it is not always consistently carried forward in his work. He notes that:

...notions of an autonomous/free self are shaped not just by Western liberal-secular sensibilities, but predominantly with reference to other discourses, histories and sensibilities - they are in simultaneous connection

and dialogue with multiple times and places, not least those of the 'homeland'. (p. 62)

Here, he actually does move away from peculiarising autonomy and free self and making them exclusive to Western liberal-secular societies. However, despite his awareness of these multiple modes of engaging with secularism, when it comes to Islam, particularly in diasporic communities in the UK, he sounds rather categorical, when he describes his concept of 'non-Islamiosity': "non-Islamiosity is about the ways in which some London Iranians from Shi'a backgrounds construct, experience and live diasporic identity, community and consciousness by deliberately moving away from or against *any* notion of Islam - and only Islam" (p. 63) (the emphasis is mine). The various examples Gholami provides based on his cases study, includes how these Shi'a Iranian Muslims combine not only Iranian national customs and traditions with 'non-Islamic' practices such as drinking alcohol, dancing, not wearing the veil but also certain ('cultural' and) 'Islamic' practices which mainly deal with rituals as part of their 'non-Islamiosity' (see his narrative about a party he has gone to witnessing the curious combination of wine-drinking with recitation of *salawat*; p. 65).

The term 'non-Islamious' requires critical problematisation but I will first try to see how Gholami views this condition or position vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic. In providing some reasons for this shift, Gholami says:

As there is generally strong antipathy within the non-Islamious section of the Iranian diaspora towards Iran's Islamic government, which is blamed for Iranians' dispersal, non-Islamiosity is at one level a strategy for turning feelings of suffering, loss and forced dispersion into agentive sentiments of resistance, dissidence and community (nation) building and unification. (p. 64)

The role of dissatisfaction with the dominant policies of the Islamic Republic is critical here. However, even though Gholami focusses on a pool of informants who seem to endorse or confirm his hypothesis about the 'non-Islamious'

characteristics of these people, he fails to provide the narrative of a similarly dissatisfied diaspora who do not define themselves in exactly these terms. Here, I have assumed that this description is accurate enough to legitimise the term itself. As he further elaborates on his point, he suggests that “rather than being about ‘becoming secular’ as an end in itself, non-Islamiosity is a means by which individual and social consciousness are ‘freed’ from Islamic theological, cosmological and eschatological doctrines” (p. 64). There are literally no examples of ‘theological’, ‘cosmological’ or ‘eschatological’ doctrines he refers to; what we find is exclusively about rituals, which fall under a lower category of jurisprudential rulings. The fact that someone can drink alcohol or dance at parties does not in and by itself signal a shift from cosmology or theology. It requires a much more conscious engagement with these concepts rather than a disregard, a rejection or even re-negotiation of rituals at this level.

It is ironic that at the end of his narrative about the party, Gholami speaks about “the freedom to use *salawat* as a ‘toasting word’, for example, being gratefully aware that, in Iran, you would have been executed for doing so” (p. 66). He is probably referring to the perception of the people who would do this who exaggerate about the reactions to this practice. Regardless of what one might assume about the Islamic Republic, there is no law in Iran or even in jurisprudence that would lead to someone’s executing for drinking alcohol or using the *salawat* lightly. Such observations about Gholami’s approach to the issue may sound minor and pedantic but the perception runs throughout the entire narrative.

In discussing how some of these Iranian women speak amongst themselves about what to wear and not to wear, Gholami notes that “the aim was to get as close as possible to the boundaries of religious acceptability without transgressing them. But this also involved a meticulous exercise in Islamic hermeneutics, which could sometimes result in the boundaries being slightly redrawn” (p. 73). Again as in the case of his reference to cosmology and theology, it is not exactly clear how these women would think of ‘Islamic hermeneutics’ and a ‘meticulous’ one for that matter. It seems that Gholami has read too much into these narratives at points. Gholami proposes a different term to capture the variations of practices among the informants of his study. Instead of using ‘tactics’, ‘strategies’ or ‘negotiations’, he

uses the term 'concession' referring to an act of actively giving something away – something that is dear or important to the person. Here, he contrasts concession with agency:

By deploying tactics, then, Muslims use secular structures and sensibilities to enhance their agency - and, in so doing, reproduce but also refashion them... Concessions, therefore, are not a means to enhance agency; they are a constant source of anxiety, doubt and guilt. (p. 76)

What Gholami fails to consider is that there are sensibilities and imaginaries among certain Muslims – be they diasporic or inhabiting their homelands – that allow the person to push these boundaries without having feelings of anxiety, doubt or guilt as such. Examples about in literature from medieval periods in poetry and various humanist and literary writings which challenge such notions (see Zubaida 2011, pp. 17-25 where he specifically discusses consumption of alcohol, issues of sexuality and gender, and homosexuality).

One of the key observations to be noted about Gholami's work is that even though it times he puts Islam in quotations (and the very title of his article signals a shift from unitary readings), indeed he reproduces the same category in a different form. He deliberately uses the term 'non-Islamious' to move away from 'Islamicness' in any sense. Zubaida has lucidly illustrated this point:

The discourse of difference is reinforced by the practice of attaching the adjective 'Islamic' to a wide range of aspects of the histories and cultures of the Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia and India, each encompassing a wide diversity, as well as differing from the others. We have 'Islamic history', 'Islamic art', 'Islamic science', 'Muslim society'... and many other such usages. (Zubaida 2011, p. 23)

Zubaida scrutinises the essentialism at the heart of such appellations and proceeds to say:

The term implies that those regions have Islam as their essence, and confirms their otherness from the 'Christian' West. Yet this 'West' is hardly ever given the adjective 'Christian' with regard to its history, art, science and so on. So, the history of Europe and its offshoots is not 'Christian history', even though Christianity and its churches play prominent parts in it. (pp. 23-24)

As we can see, Zubaida's point so vividly resembles Abu-Lughod's objections when she challenges about what 'Islam' prescribes for women (Abu-Lughod 2002). The same critical reflection can be traced differently in Shahab Ahmed's work (2015), *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*. The narrative that Ahmed (2015, pp. 3-4) gives of a Muslim man drinking wine and his encounter with a European philosopher is particularly revealing and quite at odds with how Gholami describes his 'non-Islamiosity'.

To be fair, one has to admit that Gholami's work is probably not about more philosophical and epistemological issues surround definitions or interpretations of Islam (even though he specifically mentions terminologies such as cosmology and hermeneutics). He has tried to make sense to how the practices of these diasporic communities are 'different' from one would typically assume to be 'Islamic'. There is, however, an element of over-simplification here which overlooks not only the complex mentalities of human beings and the cultural elements in their lives, but also takes for granted what might indeed have much deeper roots that do not necessarily owe their entire explanation to the rise of the Islamic Republic as a political entity.

If one pursues that areas that Shahab Ahmed covers in his book, it is perhaps pertinent to ask: who do we consider a practicing Muslim? This question has been challenging to me and this thesis too. In a more specific sense, one can ask: who do we consider a practicing Muslim woman? What is it that gives legitimacy or validity to 'practice'? Is it simply alignment with rigid and fixed rituals and customs? If someone negotiates or pushes the boundaries of these practices, can we legitimately describe them as 'secular' or 'non-Islamious' and attributed the shift to political circumstances alone?

Interrogating the concept of a 'pure' Islam, Zubaida (2011) argues that "Islam as a distinct culture, then, is illusory". This does not necessarily lead to Islam being a completely arbitrary notion with such loose abstraction that anyone can attribute anything to it. There are certain constants in it: "As a religion it has certain constants, such as the holy book and the belief in the unity of God and the prophethood of Muhammad. But even these constants are constructed through a variety of discourses and practices enshrined in differing institutions" (p. 9). As we can see, building on how Zubaida problematizes the issue of 'Islam' (and also Ahmed 2015, pp. 113-175), the idea of being a 'practicing' Muslim (woman) is subject to similar considerations and qualifications. Therefore, it must be noted here that even though while reporting findings of the research and quoting from my informants, I do use the term 'practicing' but it is by no means a fixed, rigid and concrete notion. It is always subject to change, even though certain basic constants may remain the same.

One of the other issues which surface in passing in Gholami's work is the issue of citizenship in liberal societies. In pointing out the gap in literature, Gholami notes that following the arguments of existing literature: "Secular Muslims can never become full members of secular (white) Western society; they will never gain 'complete' citizenship (in a more qualitative sense of the word), whether they want to or not, whether they know it or not." (p. 67). The topic is extensively covered in Andrew March's recent work (2009), *Islam and Liberal Citizenship* in which he challenges the very foundations of the above claim. Indeed, the very claim that even if Muslims wanted, they would not be able to gain complete citizenship sounds too far-fetched. However, the way Gholami challenges the argument or at least tries to open a new avenue, does not seem to do full justice to the issue as he does not consider at a critical level theories about citizenship, and questions of political theories the way March addresses. This is a secondary note on Gholami's work but living in liberal societies and dealing with challenges of citizenship does not seem to have a direct impact on the questions I am addressing in this thesis.

Iranian Diaspora in London

According to the 2011 census in the UK, the number of Iranians living in London is 36, 250. Gholami (2015, p. 85) provides a detailed breakdown of the number of Iranians in London based on the data from the census, with around 13,500 Iranians in the inner London area. The figures are not very accurate because there are Iranians who do not identify as Iranians or they have changed their names. This research relies on information and interviews with a small sample of Muslim Iranian women that I am describing below.

In the recent past, many Iranians came to London for higher education (in the leading universities of this city) or due to their father's job as an Iranian diplomat in England. Some diplomats' children stayed after their father's job finished. According to a recent claim by a member of Iranian Parliament, over 400⁵⁴ sons and daughters of high-ranking prominent Iranian government officials are studying in England. A small number of Iranians entered the UK as political refugees, and therefore they cannot return to Iran. Iranians who became refugees do not usually go back to Iran due to fear of prosecution and the fact that the bad reputation of being an Iranian refugee and the consequent stigma can prohibit reintegration within the Iranian society. UK, compared to France, Germany, USA and Canada has been less receptive towards Iranian political dissidents, even in the course of the new wave of political asylum seeking of the Green Movement activists after the 2009 disputed presidential election.

As Sreberny (2000) and McAuliffe (2007) also suggest, I argue that the Iranian diaspora in London does not necessarily represent a discrete community. Nor can we specify a section of the city for the Iranian community in London in the manner that Edgware Road is a hub for Arabs or Chinatown is for Chinese. The Iranian diaspora in London consists of multiple communities defined by interactions between national, religious, ethnic and linguistic identities (McAuliffe, 2007). The multiplicity of these national and religious identities are vividly displayed in Spellman's work (2004), also mentioned above. Like many other countries, Iran is

⁵⁴ See <http://goo.gl/X9uKPR>

composed of different religious, linguistic and ethnic backgrounds. The majority is Shia Muslim, and Iranians with different backgrounds have their own groups and centres in the diaspora.

We can recognise different features of the Iranian diaspora in London by examining the structure of the community around specific Iranian individuals. There are Iranians who try their best to stay away from other Iranians, while others interact primarily with Iranians (see also Gholami 2014). Other Muslim Iranians in the diaspora mostly engage with the non-Muslim community, while some engage with Muslim community. None of these markers could exclusively address the problem I am investigating in a distinct manner. Similar problems may indeed be found with any of these groups as far as it regards the agencies and choices of women and how male-dominated dichotomies and mentalities may indeed be deep-rooted among them. The cases that I am looking at are all grappling with these issues and the responses display the challenge at the heart of decisions to control their own dress code.

As I mentioned earlier we cannot talk about the Iranian diaspora in London as a monolithic community because they do not live in a concentrated place and there are deep divisions among Iranians with different political and religious beliefs. This point, however, requires a further qualification. Even though there are visible political, religious and ideological differences, socially, Iranians from different backgrounds do interact on many occasions which includes conferences and social events. The overlaps in these categories blur the clear-cut distinctions which brings under question the religious-secular divide.

Here I will focus on the group of Iranians that I have been working with in this research. The 40 women that I worked with were between the ages of 22 and 57 with the median age of 30. They are all Shia Muslim, but not necessarily practicing. Most come from middle class families and are educated to tertiary level. A number of my informants were PhD students, some work in high-ranking jobs in London, some are housewives and some are job seekers. They came to London either for their own job, for their husband's or father's job, or for higher education. These

women come from different cities and ethnic backgrounds in Iran, but the majority are from the capital city, Tehran.

All the women that I interviewed were born in and grew up in Iran. This is essential to my research because I am interested specifically in how the practice and perception of hijab changes in Iranian women who grew up in Iran when they come to London. For example, it was important to see how Iranian society, Iranian schools, media and families influenced the way women understand hijab and how this perception changes after they come to London.

Being familiar with the history of hijab policies and hijab jurisprudence that I have explored in Chapter Three is essential in order to understand the context of hijab in Iran. Most of the works on Muslim women are done on second and third generation immigrants. These works deal with women who have been born in the West and grew up there, and their encounter with the realities, contingencies and challenges of the veil is therefore quite different from a person who has grown up in an Islamic country like Iran. Iranian media and public education produce their own discourse of hijab, and the resultant change in opinion about and practice of hijab after women emigrate from Iran and enter a new culture merits increased scrutiny.

The diasporic Iranians I interviewed do not necessarily have long-term plans to stay in the UK. Some of the women may settle in the UK, but when I spoke to them they were not sure what they wanted to do. Many of the Iranians I interviewed do not feel sure of their position in British society because they do not know if they are going to stay or to go back to Iran. Their intentions are strongly dependent on the socio-political situation in Iran, which changed dramatically during the 2005-2013 Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's term of presidency. A new wave of Iranian elites has travelled to Western countries for higher education and for work. Because they do not know when or if they want to go back to Iran, they may consider their situation temporary and may not try to build a community for themselves. Some informants said that when their children reach school age they hope to return to Iran, if the economic and political situation permits, because if they stay in the UK their children will become more British and less Iranian. Therefore, there is an increased sense of identity here: migration and citizenship bring about with themselves challenges that

could lead to the erosion of one identity and the development of a new one or at least one with newer elements in it.

Unlike many other diasporic communities, Iranians in London are not centralised in any recognisable 'Iranian town,' although there are some areas that do accommodate more Iranians, such as Northwest and West London and Kensington. One possible explanation for the lack of centralisation is that, as mentioned above, Iranian immigrants may not have long-term plans to stay in London. Therefore, when they arrive, they do not seek out an Iranian community to join. Based on my interviews and experience, many Iranians prefer not to live in places that other Iranians do. My informants are mainly accommodated in areas near their university or workplace, and their priority has not been to find a place with more Iranians. Although they do not seek to live in a place with an Iranian community, they do visit Iranian centres.

My interviews and personal observations suggest that the relatively more religious Iranians attend Iranian gatherings more frequently than the more secular Iranians in London. Most Iranian do not regularly attend the events of Iranian centres, but a large percentage of the relatively more religious Iranians do attend weekly or monthly religious gatherings in one of the diverse religious centres of Iranians in London. A comparative note is warranted here.

None of these centres seem to play a significant role in the lives of Iranians in London when compared to the central role of the community gatherings of, for example, non-Iranian Khoja Shias or Ismailis in London. With regard to the Twelver Khoja Shias, it must be noted that even though they share a set of doctrines with Iranian Shias, their history and background is greatly different: being mainly from the subcontinent or East African origins they, like Ismailis, form a strong entrepreneurial community with strong ties to British society which goes back to many decades ago. Therefore, looking into how they would practice the hijab would be interesting but does not closely overlap with the main questions of this thesis. As regards the Ismaili Muslims, who have successful and function social institutions and a cohesive community (with Ismailis from various backgrounds, including Iranians), an important point to be noted is that Ismailis believe in a living present Imam (Imam

of the Time). Therefore, the question of religious authority is seen in an entirely different light: there is a singular, unique authority here which is not comparable to the disaggregate and dispersed authority of the scholars and jurists in the Twelver community. A detailed recent analysis of Ismaili perceptions of authority is provided in Daryoush Mohammad Poor's *Authority without Territory* (2014). There is a brief section in his book (p. 226) in which he speaks about the emancipation of women in the educational efforts of the Ismaili imamate. However, like the case of the Twelver Khojas, the example of Ismailis is also beyond the scope of this research, but deserves to be studied separated when it comes to practices of hijab (which does not exist in this form in the Ismaili community in London).

The most important Iranian centres used by my informants are the following:

- The Islamic Student Association (*Kanun Towhid*), located in Hammersmith, is the base of the Iranian student union. It was established before the Islamic revolution and is run by Iranian students. It holds weekly events on Saturday evenings. This place is one of the first and most important gathering places for Iranian students and other Iranians in London.
- The Islamic Centre of England (*Markz Eslami*), located in Maida Vale, is run by Abdul-Hossein Moezzi, the official representative of the Supreme Leader of Iran. It holds regular daily and weekly Islamic events and classes for men and women, especially on religious occasions. Along with *Kanun Towhid*, it is one of the most important gathering places for religious Iranians. Most attendants of the events of this centre, in principle, support the Iranian government and do not favor the opposition.
- The Islamic Universal Association (*Majma Eslami*) is located in Holland Park and run by the representative of the late marja' Ayatollah Mohammadreza Gulpayegani. This centre, which attracts the more non-political Shia Iranians, only holds events on important religious occasion like *Ramadan* and *Muharam* (the memorial of the death of Imam Hossein). Some Shia Muslims from other ethnic backgrounds attend these events too, but the majority are Iranians.
- Vali society (*Mahfel Vali*), located in Royal Park, is run by an Iranian family who have dedicated the facility for weekly events. Many of my informants attend these events on a regular basis. Iranian religious intellectuals who travel to London

usually speak here and most of the attendees are supporters of Iranian reformists and a relatively more liberal Islam. This place is now closed down due to political pressures from inside Iran. The update (in 2016) is coming from the time when I was completing revisions of the final versions of this research.

- Persian or Iranian societies at London universities, especially those at The School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London (SOAS) and University College London (UCL), hold events on topics related to Iranian issues and politics. These events bring together Iranians of different political and religious views in a manner not seen in the places mentioned above.

While these centres are the most important places attended by my informants, this does not mean that all Iranians in London attend one or more of them. There are many Iranians who have never attended any of the centres above, or who have other public and private places to go to, including the cultural and non-political events organized by Iran Heritage Foundation, the political and secular events of *Anjomane Sokhan*, and the events that surround two major London-based Persian satellite TV channels with millions of viewers in Iran and around the globe: BBC Persian and Manoto (which have gathered more than 300 successful Iranian journalists in London). These Iranians may be seen in a broader sense as more 'secular' than religious as can be seen in Gholami's narrative (2014). I have earlier contested some of the terms for this perception of secularity as discussed by Gholami but when it comes to the issue of the veil, it is ironic that secularity seems far off the chart if a woman observes the hijab. Hijab is still seen as a powerful marker of religious identity.

The Islamic Student Association (*Kanun Towhid* London)

The Islamic Student Association was founded in 1972 by a number of Iranian students in London. At first, their meetings were held in their houses. After the number of Iranian students increased, they bought and repurposed a church in Hammersmith, where programmes have been held since 1976. The founding aim was to facilitate conversation amongst students on religious, social, and political issues. One of the main purposes was fighting against the Shah Regime in Iran.

Before the 1979 revolution, *Kanun Towhid* had been a central place for Iranian students in London. Students themselves manage it. Every Saturday afternoon and evening, a programme is held here on a range of subjects. Although it is an independent student association, the Iranian government financially supports it. Therefore, the content of the events should not oppose Iranian government principles and at the same time it is challenging. During the directory of the reformists, the conservatives criticized many of their events because they regarded them as against the values of the Iranian government.

A council is responsible for choosing the president and the heads of the cultural and scientific sections. These three people are responsible for organising events, and new elections are held for their positions every six months. Students with diverse political orientations have held responsibility in *Kanun Towhid*, and as a result the tenor of events has varied. For example, when the directors were reformist and more liberal, the programmes and events covered controversial topics including criticism of the government's international and internal policies. Religious intellectuals were also invited to give lectures. But when conservatives came to power, many things changed.

I was a member of the council for three years, and was the manager of cultural events for one year. Many Iranians other than students took part in our programmes, and we tried to invite people from all political orientations and cover as many topics as we could. The directors who succeeded us were different in political orientation (conservative), and they expelled many of the reformist members. The nature of the events changed, and after a while I was also expelled along with my husband. This story has been repeated throughout the history of this student association. My own observation is that in the five years that I have been living in London, when the reformist group held power, the events were more crowded and more Iranians took part in them.

This location is central to my research because the Iranians I engaged with all participated in *Kanun Towhid's* events, especially when the directors were more reformist and liberal. For example, they invited Mohammad Khatami at the time of

his presidency. This event had the highest attendance seen in events of the centre, and this shows that the reformist party has more supporters in London.

The women who attend *Kanun Towhid's* events wear a scarf, even if they are not hijabi women. In other words, there is an unwritten norm or rule that almost all the women have been obeying since it was founded. In the period during which I held responsibility, we organised an event about Iranian women who were active in women's rights and charity work, and many participants came without wearing a scarf⁵⁵.

The Islamic Centre of England (*Markaz Eslami*)

The Islamic Centre of England is a religious centre founded in 1995 by the government of Iran that was officially opened in 1998. It directly represents the Iranian government, is headed by the official religious representative of Ayatollah Khamenei, and offers services to Iranians and, to a lesser extent, to Shia Muslims from other countries including as Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India. The building is based in Maida Vale, and the hall can accommodate around 500 people in chairs or 1,000 seated on the floor. It has a library and classrooms for classes on topics such as the Quran or the English language.

The main purpose of this centre is to provide religious guidance and service and to host Islamic rituals. They hold several weekly events such as Friday prayers and *Dua Kumayl* on Thursdays. They also celebrate the birth and commemorate the death of Imams. They have the highest level of attendance for *Muharam* (the memorial of the death of Imam Hossein) as well as the month of Ramadan during which periods they serve dinner to all guests in their hundreds every night.

The Islamic Centre is one of the most important religious centres that attract Iranians in London. However, after the 2009 presidential election in Iran and the birth of the Green Movement, many reformists boycotted attending the Islamic

⁵⁵ That we were successful in letting non-hijabi women attend *Kanun Towhid's* event without a scarf and without fear was a very big achievement for us. The open and pluralist nature of our work then allowed a more inclusive engagement in which judgments were not made based on a woman's dress code.

Centre's events. Attending their events was a sign of support for Ahmadinejad's government. The lecturers and preachers always supported Ahmadinejad in their talks and condemned Mir Hossein Mousavi⁵⁶ for his actions. Many of the women I interviewed attended this centre's events prior to 2009 but subsequently did not like to participate. After Hassan Rouhani's election to the office of President in 2013, this centre is gradually re-attracting their lost members.

The audience here is not exclusively Iranian unlike *Kanun Towhid* that has an exclusively Iranian audience.

Since Ayatollah Khamenei (the Supreme Leader of Iran) directly appoints the head of the Islamic Centre, the Iranian government views it as a significant position. The Iranian government also directly funds this centre, and all the programmes represent the principles and value system of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Consequently, amongst the Iranian diaspora, attending programmes at the Islamic Centre has become a sign of supporting the conservative party, and this is often perceived negatively by Iranian reformists and supporters of the opposition political groups.

The Islamic Universal Association (*Majma Eslami*)

Ayatollah Mohammadreza Golpayegani's⁵⁷ representative in London established *Majma* in 1974. The building is located near Holland Park station. This centre organises regular religious events, and also has a library. Its programmes are very similar to those of the Islamic Centre, but it is not financially dependent on the Iranian government and therefore is more apolitical and successful in attracting Shia Iranians with a wider and more diverse range of political stance. Many Iranians who are religious but do not like to be politically engaged participate in *Majma* programmes.

⁵⁶ Mousavi was the last Prime Minister of Iran, holding office from 1981 to 1989. He was also the reformist candidate in the 2009 presidential election, after which he became the leader of the opposition.

⁵⁷ Grand Ayatollah Safi Golpayegani is a Shia Marja who currently lives in Qom. He is a supporter of the Islamic Republic.

This centre is financially dependent on the incomes of the *Marja*⁵⁸. This centre is less active than the Islamic Centre, although it is very active in *Muharam* and *Ramadan*. The participants at the centre are primarily religious Iranians, and all programmes relate to religious events. Many of my informants attend *Majma's* events during *Ramadan*. I have attended its events several times, and it was here that I first saw a woman in London wearing an Iranian style *chador* (see Figure 7 and Figure 8 in Chapter Five). Although there are a number of Iranian hijabis in London, wearing the Iranian style *chador* is very rare. This is a very important observation that even the staunch traditional and religious women do not wish to wear the *chador* while they are in London. The rationale for it seems to be a practical one. They would not want to stand out in society and draw unnecessary attention. This small observation shows how the argument of protection vs. restriction can easily collapse as soon as the context changes,

Vali society (*Mahfel Vali*)

Mahfel Vali is, in many ways, different from the other centres mentioned, and is especially important to my informants. *Mahfel Vali* is a small saloon in Royal Park that belongs to an Iranian family. They have dedicated it to cultural, social, political, and religious events that primarily attracts Iranian liberal reformist Muslims living in London. The saloon can accommodate about 80 people, but in some occasions up to 120 people have attended. The most popular and consistent programme is the lecture series on sacred spirituality by Abul-Ghasem Fanaei (see Chapter Three) and interpretation of Quran By Ata'ollah Mohajerani⁵⁹, each held biweekly on alternate Fridays. Apart from these two fixed programmes, there are some events on occasions such as Ramadan and *Muharam*. Many religious intellectuals have lectured here when they come to London, and it has been a base for charity work.

The participants mostly hold reformist political views. Uniquely, some non-hijabi women take part in the religious events without wearing a scarf. This is very

⁵⁸ *Marja* means religious reference and refers to those clerics who have the authority to make legal decisions in the Islamic law for their followers. In Shia Islam after Quran, prophet Mohammad and the Imams, *marja* is the highest authority.

⁵⁹ Ata'ollah Mohajerani is a scholar who served as Minister of Culture in Mohammad Khatami's cabinet.

uncommon amongst Shia religious gatherings in which even non-hijabis generally cover their head. The fact that the owner of *Mahfel Vali* provides a location where women can freely participate in events without worrying about what they wear and without pretending to believe what they do not believe is a remarkable gift to the community. At no other centre mentioned above is similar freedom allotted. Many of the women I interviewed, especially the students, know about *Mahfel Vali* and participate in their events.

Another unique feature is that women and men sit in the same room, and sit next to each other. The other two centres described above have separate spaces for men and women, who cannot see each other. Both inside and outside Iran, it is very common for religious events to have gender-segregated spaces: either men's and women's spaces are completely separate, or when there is only one room, men sit on one side and women sit on the other. Most of the time, a wall or curtain divides the two sexes. In *Mahfel Vali*, men and women may sit together without concern.

These two features have made *Mahfel Vali* popular for many of my informants who are religious but whose religiosity is relatively more liberal than the majority of practicing Muslim Shia Iranians.

The unique characteristics at *Mahfel Vali* have encouraged many people who do not otherwise like religious ceremonies to attend its religious events. Many Iranians are generally critical about the structures and requirements of religious events, in part because religion and politics have become highly intertwined after the Islamic revolution. In consequence, people often blame religion for many governmental problems. *Mahfel Vali* provides an environment where Iranians who are politically reformist and socially liberal but personally religious can attend religious events comfortably.

Persian and Iranian Society Events at London Universities

Events hosted by university societies, especially societies at UCL and SOAS, are important gathering places for my informants. Events on Iranian political issues have received a broad audience. I have attended many of these events, and have met

some of my informants here. The majority of the participants are Iranian students, or graduates now working in London.

The government in Iran is very sensitive about events relating to Iran's international and national policy. Following the 2009 election and the emergence of the Green Movement in Iran, these societies held several lectures and events that made news in Iranian government media. The media allied with Ahmadinejad labelled these events *fitna* (sedition)—that is, endeavours against the Islamic Republic—and associated them with the UK government.

European encounter: shared experience, individual responses

One of the fundamental arguments of my thesis is that Iranian women have a choice and an agency to exercise when it comes to deciding about their dress code. This agency is informed by the political and social backgrounds which they come from and as such they create and develop their own forms of practice of hijab. Nonetheless, all the 40 women whom I interviewed agreed on some shared experiences of the Iranian diaspora as they experience it. I believe that these are the direct result of living outside Iran and having the experience of living in London, and that they can be generalised for this group.

The first matter that I want to highlight is that all 40 women I interviewed in London were against the compulsory requirement of hijab in Iran, including the women who had a full traditional hijab themselves. Ahmadi Khorasani (2011) describes research done on hijab amongst women attending the University of Tehran. One 2004 study solicited female students' opinions on the legal requirement to wear hijab. 32.9% completely agreed, 20.4% partly agreed, 19.7% totally disagreed and 11.1% partly disagreed. This shows that even amongst university students in Iran, a considerable segment approves of the compulsory imposition of hijab. All my informants disagreed with the imposition of hijab, including those who are strictly observant themselves. Their perception has changed through living in London, where women operate under less structured and strict dress code and are relatively more free to wear whatever they like, and where you can see such a variety of dress by simply walking in the street. There is a multiple dimension to this shift. On the one hand,

maintaining an identity which is Iranian and Muslim is important to them and on the other hand conditions of life in a liberal society has enabled them to carve out their own identity without having to relinquish what they find integral to their identity and values. This is one of the examples that one could trace if we look at March's arguments (2009) about the possibility of being a Muslim and having liberal citizenship. It also defies the dogmatic perception of the uniqueness of European modernity

The educational system and the media in Iran teach girls from the youngest age that if you want to be protected, you have to observe hijab, and that hijab promotes a healthy society and family stability and strength. While many hijabi women believe this, in reality it might not be true. In fact, those women who have left Iran and have seen a city like London have come to the conclusion that the best way to be safe is by not wearing the headscarf (see 'Hijab and Sexual Harassment', below). It could be argued that the rising Islamophobic reactions of the public to Muslim hijab in the UK in the 1990s and the past decade might account for part of this conclusion, but, at least to some extent, it is also rooted in the personal observations of the Iranian Muslims in London that suggest that there is no meaningful positive correlation between not covering the head and sexual harassment. Moreover, what must be noted is that the educational system and the media is deeply informed by indoctrination and shaped by an antagonistic propaganda which would at times distort realities of a different social and political setting if it is not politically aligned with it. The reason I am adding this qualification is that one must not assume it is purely a matter of reaction to colonial policies or Eurocentric views. Dogmatism on the side of the political establishment is also a contributing factor to the continuation and also collapse of these perceptions. It continues as long as women are convinced that any European dress code not in line with 'Islamic' norms is morally corrupt. It collapses the moment women realise that this image is deeply flawed.

Compulsory hijab has become the most visibly Islamic stronghold of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which distinguishes it from other Muslim societies, and, therefore the government tries its best to guard it. During the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, this was done through the moral police (*gashte ershad*). The

government claims that by forcing women to cover, it is protecting them and making life easier for them, but, in practice, the opposite has been the result.

The majority of my informants mentioned these unintended consequences as a reason that they oppose compulsory hijab. Khatoon, 26, wears full hijab and is pursuing a degree in law. She states:

I am completely against compulsory hijab in Iran, because this law is detrimental both to those women who have chosen to observe hijab and those women who wear it unwillingly. In Iran today, there is no difference between a woman who likes to receive sexual attention and a women who doesn't like to receive attention, because all women follow one dress code. Therefore, you see cars honk at women who don't want to receive this attention.⁶⁰ Compulsory hijab also leads non-hijabi women to feel hatred toward hijabi women. For example, my mother went to a shopping centre and some loose hijabi girls⁶¹ thought that my mum is a moral police and they were scared.⁶²

My informants who regularly visit Iran believe that compulsory hijab in Iran has made the situation difficult for both believers and non-believers in Islamic hijab in Iran. In the eyes of some hijabi women and their male protagonists, the non-hijabi women have corrupted society because they sexually arouse men. In the eyes of non-hijabi women (and similarly among some of their male protagonists), hijabi women are responsible for their oppression, and they see full hijabi women as government supporters. Termeh, 26, a banker with an MA in Finance, elaborates:

⁶⁰ Iranian governmental policy prohibits nightclubs and places with a similar function. Streets, therefore, function as massive space for choosing, meeting and proposing to potential sexual partners, often without the consent of the other party. Men who want to find a girlfriend or sex partner will simply stop and honk their horn in front of any women, presuming that all women are the same and seeing all women as a potential partner.

⁶¹ Her mother stood out because compared to her full traditional hijab, partial-hijabis wear more make-ups, wear shorter and tighter *mantos* with brighter colours, and reveal parts of their hair and body (in addition to the face and hands).

⁶² Interview with Khatoon, conducted at Southgate, 16/09/2012

I think that the requirement of hijab in Iran is a game played by the Islamic Republic, and the people are the players. People are being fooled by this game that the government is playing with them. The identity of the Islamic Republic of Iran goes hand in hand with the imposition of hijab in Iran. It is inseparable; they can't imagine themselves without it. By causing fear and terror they try to convey this message to people that 'don't even think of doing anything'. For example, when inflation is so high and the economic situation is really bad, the government keeps people engaged by fear about appearance, and doesn't let them think of anything else. The Islamic Republic needs supporters for itself. Those people who support it approve of the imposition of hijab, and therefore the government forces it upon those who don't want hijab just to make its supporters happy at the price of oppressing those who don't believe in it.⁶³

Termeh's response clearly depicts the ideological and dogmatic penchant of the state for control in all spheres of life and it applies to the case of women too.

In Iran today the amount of makeup that women use is relatively high. Iran also has one of the highest rates of cosmetic surgery—especially nose jobs (Jafar and Casanova, 2013, p. 55). According to my own observation and my informants' statements, the hijab places a great deal of attention on the face. Although the government's purpose has been to decrease women's attention towards their appearance, they have simply shifted the location of the battlefield. In other words, the strict and draconian measures of controlling women in Iran has had unintended consequences. One of the findings of this thesis is also about the unintended consequences of compulsory hijab. It has become counterproductive and at the same time it has opened the eyes of women to a different image or view from that the state has been promoting.

⁶³ Interview with Termeh, conducted at Islington, 14/11/2012

Hijab and Sexual Harassment

As I mentioned earlier, the Iranian government supposes that by forcing women to cover, they are protecting the women from sexual harassment. But what is happening in the society is exactly the opposite. All of the women whom I have formally interviewed, and many others I have spoken to, have had at least one experience of sexual harassment—for example, in a taxi or in crowded places. Those Iranian women who live in London can understand the difference in the way they feel in society in terms of sexual harassment and men's attitude. Fereshteh, 22, who has undergone a major transformation in her dress code (see Chapter Six) from 'full progressive hijab' (women who cover all parts of their body except the face and hand) to 'conservative hijab-less' (women who do believe in some limits in their dress code but do not wear a headscarf), says the following regarding compulsory hijab and sexual harassment in Iran:

My mum started observing hijab just before the Islamic revolution. Before that, she was hijab-less. I always ask my mum, 'Why did you accept the imposition of hijab after the revolution?' She replies that Iranians wanted to make a society in which everyone is comfortable, even those who don't have control over their desires. But I always tell my mum that they have gone the wrong way, because the entire burden is placed on the shoulders of women, and society does not expect anything from men. It is always women who must cover and be careful about their behaviour. I think this perspective about hijab is also offensive to men, because they are seen as animals that have no control over their sexual desires. In our society in Iran, all the blame is always placed on women, and this is very sad. I think that the more women cover themselves in a society, the more bad looks and sexual harassment happens.⁶⁴

Fereshteh highlights a significant point about the excessive attention to women in a disempowering sense: the male members of society are left on their own and are

⁶⁴ Interview with Fereshteh, conducted at SOAS, 5/10/2012

free from any such restrictions while women are assigned the sole responsibility for preserving the modesty and moral health of the society. The entire policy is designed in a manner which privileges male members of the society while it leaves women at a disadvantage. Awareness of such discriminations has been critical in the shift in dress code.

Even before starting this research, I always wrestled with whether hijab protects women from the male gaze and from sexual harassment. I have not encountered an example of a woman who has never experienced sexual harassment in the streets of Tehran. This shows that even in a society where all women are covered, we still have problems of harassment, and covering does not eradicate sexual insult. This is yet another example of why the protection vs. restriction dichotomy fails to explain a problem and provide solutions to it. The entire articulation of the hijab in this manner does not relate to the actual problem. In short, it is not a response. It is not part of the solution. It is rather part of the problem.

Living in a city like London gives Iranian women a different comparative perspective on the male gaze. The diasporic location provides Iranian women with comparative frameworks and the necessary distance and lens to judge, based on lived-experience, that male gaze in Iran is more disturbing and sexual than societies where hijab is not observed by the majority of women. In Iran, it is very common for people to look at each other and to intrude personal spaces of others by sexual gaze, especially in public transport. Therefore, many hijabi women believe that the *chador* or full hijab will help them avert sexual attention from men. But in London, things work differently. Walking in the streets, one can see all types of dress. Many of my informants mentioned that the amount of attention they get in streets of London is comparably less with Tehran. According to their testimony based on their lived experience, they think men's disturbing sexual gaze is felt much less in London. Therefore, their view on hijab as a protection towards unwanted looks has also changed.

In Iran, the educational system and the media have promoted the belief that women's hair is evocative for men. Those women who have lived in London do not believe this to be true. Fereshteh, 22, says:

*When I was in Iran at the age of 11, I was wearing chador and walking in a book exhibition, and a man touched my hip. At that time, I was so shocked because I didn't know anything about sexuality. I even couldn't say anything to my brother, who was walking next to me. I couldn't speak for two hours. I told my mum, and she told me that some men are crazy. When I told my dad several years later, he thought that this had only happened to me and it's something rare. This is the problem of our culture: women don't speak out about these kinds of experiences because the society always blames the woman.*⁶⁵

Therefore, while scholars such as Motahhari (2010) have advanced the view that hijab is protective for women, this view is challenged by the lived experience of many hijabi women in London. Some of my informants have mentioned that hijab does not simply involve covering certain parts of the body—you can go without a scarf and still be modest. This is the result of living in London, where one can see examples of modesty and immodesty on the streets in daily life, often independent of dress. Many of my interviewees stated that becoming close friends with other non-Muslim and Muslim women, who despite being modest and moral did not observe hijab, had a profound impact on their perception towards the relationship between modesty and hijab. According to all of them, living in London brought them to the conclusion that hijab and modesty do not necessarily correlate positively. A part of this shift is due to direct encounter with the *other*: the anti-Western propaganda of the media in Iran often promotes the idea the being without hijab is synonymous with the most outrageous immoral conduct. This line of propaganda must not if course be confused with a critique of Orientalism, colonial or Eurocentric perspectives. While the latter is theoretically coherent and robust, the first is purely based in a dogmatic ideology which is meant to serve the grip of the state and the male elite on women. Therefore, it is critical to make a clear distinction here about this.

⁶⁵ Interview with Fereshteh, conducted at SOAS, 5/10/2012

The Effect of Hijab on Daily Life and Work in London

Due to my empirical and theoretical interest in hijab practice, I engaged with the diaspora differently from other scholars working on the British diaspora (see, for example, Alexander et al., 2013; Baumann, 1996; Ware and Back, 2002). Their works have concentrated on how the diaspora is shaped. Bauman examines how different ethnic backgrounds live in Southall, and how they shape and contest their identity, culture, and community. He also problematises the self-conscious construction of community in some places. Because the Iranian diaspora does not have this type of geographically delimited community, I have not attempted to study multiple aspects of the living experience of Iranians in London. Rather, I have only focused on one part of the daily life of women: their relationship to hijab.

As a hijabi myself, I have to admit that the experience of wearing hijab and headscarf in London is much easier than in other Western countries. The cultural context of tolerance and acceptance of different clothing cultures in London and the fact that the number of hijabi women in London is higher makes it easier and socially less costly to have hijab in London. My own personal lived experience and observations and that of those of my interviewees who had lived in more than Western country suggests that British culture, in general, is more accommodating to religious minorities and Islamic life-styles. But this does not mean that all hijabi women have the same experience and enjoy the same level of cultural comfort in UK⁶⁶.

Most of the women in London I interviewed who do not wear a headscarf said that they feel comfortable with how they look. Some other women who wear a headscarf believe that if they chose not to do so, their experience in general would improve. For example, they might be treated better at their workplace or experience better customer service. Unlike many hijabi women from other countries in London, Iranian hijabi women do not feel they are protesting with their hijab, and many of them do admit that they do not like the way other people behave with them. One of the reasons that Iranian women do not view wearing hijab as a protest is that they come from a background where hijab itself has turned into a force for injustice in

⁶⁶For reports on attacks against Muslim women in UK in media see <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/jun/28/women-targeted-attacks-muslims>.

many segments of society. Growing impatience with male-driven discriminatory practices has pushed Iranian women further away from viewing hijab as a protest in a Western context.

Termeh, 26, is a professional women working as a consultant in a well-known bank. She follows a 'partial-hijab' dress code (that is, she wears a headscarf but does not cover all parts of her hair and neck, and she does not follow all the requirements set by mainstream Shia *fiqh*). After she completed her master degree, she applied for more than 40 jobs in the city. She received an interview for many of the jobs, but after each interview, the companies refused her because of her headscarf. She believes that in a place like London, while hijabi women walking down the street or doing low rank jobs may be tolerated, most employers do not support hijabi women in high-ranking professional jobs. She saw her hijab as a huge obstacle in her career. The reason that she still has her hijab is personal, and I will discuss it in Chapter 6. This suggests that having a good job in the city is much more difficult for a hijabi woman so far as, for example, Termeh states that sometimes when she goes to the ladies' room at her work, she takes off her scarf and waits for someone to come to the toilet to see that she has beautiful hair like other women. So, it is also true that wearing hijab in London does not automatically get associated with freedom of choice or belief. It is also entangled in the politics of contemporary European societies (and other backgrounds I have earlier discussed). It is in this context that Iranian women have to negotiate their dress code. It is not at all an easy choice. The decision to exercise one's agency in whatever form comes at a price, even if it is in a liberal or secular society.

Several other examples my informants provided demonstrate that hijabi women are not always treated considerately or equally. Mahsa, 33, is a dentist in London. She also follows a 'partial-hijab' dress code. She believes that if she did not wear a headscarf she would have a much better position at work. She also mentions that sometimes when she is sitting in the tube she sees people choose not to sit next to her, and she believes that the reason is her hijab.

Conclusion

The Iranian diaspora in London is in many ways different from other more typical diasporas. It is more decentralised: there is no neighbourhood in London specifically populated by the Iranian community. The reasons for immigration are diverse too. Iranians from varying ethnic, religious, and political backgrounds have migrated to London in multiple waves (see Spellman 2004). The political situation in Iran following the Islamic revolution produced a large gap amongst monarchists or other supporters of regime-change in Iran, the conservative supporters of the Islamic revolution, and the increasing supporters of reformist and moderate political forces in Iran. The clearest visible signifier of this difference is the hijab. The veil still continues to resurface in grounds which are no neutral. It is trapped in social and political constructs which are developed, sustained and promoted by patriarchal mentalities. It is in this context that women have to negotiate their choices and exercise their agency.

Most Iranians in the UK associate full-hijabi women with the current Iranian government and many full-hijabis believe that most non-hijabi women are monarchists or are supporting regime-change in Iran. Hijab practice is often treated as a display of an individual's religious and political stances toward the Iranian government's views. The trivial and black and white categorisation and dichotomies based on one's dress code has widened the divide amongst the Iranian diaspora.

The informants in this study all come from middle or upper class families in Iran, in terms of both education and economic situation. Most of them came of age in Tehran and lived in Iran for most of their lives. They immigrated to London either for higher education or for work. They do not necessarily have long time plans to stay or to leave, and their decision is contingent on the situation in Iran. In this chapter, I have suggested that this lack of long-term certainty is the main reason that Iranians do not seek to live in an Iranian community. Everyone has their own group of friends, and unlike in some other diasporas, these Iranians do not want to engage with other Iranians all the time. There are some areas in London that have a more concentrated Iranian population, including west and northwest London, and especially South

Kensington, Ealing Broadway and on Finchley Road. Many of the Iranian shops and restaurants are located in these areas.

As I explained above, religious and political stances play a significant role in the lives of most Iranians. The informants in this study are not monarchists or refugees; they are all Shia Muslims who hold political views near to that of the reformists, moderates or of the non-radical opposition. However, they can be regarded as a representative sample of Iranian women since, according to the results of the presidential elections in Iran in the past two decades and recent polls and surveys, supporters of reformists and moderates, constitute the majority of the Iranians living in Iran and London.

My informants have all experienced change in their hijab practice or in the manner that they perceive it after having a few years of living experience outside Iran. The cause of this change cannot be explained solely through living in the diaspora, because the Iranian diaspora is very diverse. The main cause is the experience of living outside Iran and seeing other people's experiences, as well as how they feel about themselves and others. Living in a city like London has changed many Iranians' views about hijab practice. Many of them have put this change into practice, while some have not because of competing concerns. This change is resulted by the experience of mixing with others, which happens also in Iran and non-European countries.

This shows how strongly the cultural environment one lives in, shapes one's view about the philosophy of hijab. Most women lost the courage to wear hijab in London, although they practiced hijab in Iran, because they felt that it had no positive utility for them in London or that its costs were more than its benefits. Most of them felt that even without hijab, they could be protected and respected. Many also feel that hijab decreases their chance of having a better job or life situation. All the women of this study were against the compulsory rule of hijab in Iran, and this shows how living in London has profoundly influenced their views. Living outside Iran has significantly changed the hijab-related views and practices of all of my interviewees: they all have cultivated a more positive (or less negative) judgement about non-hijabis; none of them support compulsory hijab; none of them regard non-hijabis as

non-modest; none of them see any positive correlation between the practice of hijab and immunity from sexual harassment; many of them have loosened the way they dress; and a number of them have stopped wearing the headscarf altogether.

As I discussed further in chapter Two, the idea of a Muslim woman as a free agent has been challenged in many ways and the challenge is rooted in either Eurocentric perception of modernity and secularity or in antagonistic reactions to Western norms. Moreover, Islamic feminism has contributed significantly to changing perceptions not only among women themselves but also among male scholars who have contributed to either perpetuating or pushing the boundaries of hijab practice. Even though views of scholars such as Kadivar, Fanaei, Ghabel and Eshkevari cannot be categorised by themselves as feminists, they, nonetheless, enhance this position. What I have discussed in this chapter, based on some of the responses from my informants, reflects how these discourses are interrelated and how they influence the practice of women, particularly when they are in European contexts. Amer (2014) is concerned about how the practice of veil has been turned into a battlefield and it is hardly seen as a neutral ground. Centrifugal forces from inside the Iranian society, political struggles outside Iran by Iranians and ideological confrontations by various political forces have all brought women into the centre of these struggles and made their choice of dress an area of contention. The earlier signs of this overtly politicised view of the veil was highlighted by Abu-Lughod (2002) in the immediate aftermath of the 'war on terror'. The effects of those policies are still vividly felt in the experience of Iranian women in London: the fact that a veiled Iranian woman who is highly educated finds it difficult to find a job is a prominent example of the challenges they feel and has direct impact on how they can negotiate their choices and exercise their agency.

Chapter Five: From the full traditional hijab to the radical hijabless

Introduction

My primary research question is why Iranian women living in London veil or unveil and what factors contribute to their choice of different schemas of dress code. I will define what I mean by different schemas of dress codes, although I am not entirely comfortable creating a typology of women's dress codes, because typologies can mislead or tend to be an essentialisation of an incomplete picture. However, for the reasons that will be discussed throughout the chapter, the schemas I use functions as a necessary heuristic device the benefits of which outweighs its disadvantages.

In order to give an overview of how Iranian women usually dress both within and outside of Iran, I need to clarify the categories that I will use in the coming paragraphs. I do not aim to over-determine mundane practices, draw a sharp line between trends, or put individuals into neat boxes. The schemas are therefore heuristic devices with which to begin to arrange the ethnographic material. One of my main findings is that we cannot give general meanings to dress codes, and that even people with the same type of dress code may have completely different reasons for doing so and different understandings of their practice.

Walking the streets of Tehran, one immediately notices that partial or full head covering is common among all women. Because hijab was legally mandated after

1980, all women in Iran are obliged to wear a scarf and *manto*⁶⁷. In the streets and public spaces, women are not allowed to show their body, except for their hands and face. The *manto* should not be very short or close-fitting. Despite these restrictions and the commonalities between women's dress codes in Iran, any observer can also easily notice huge differences between various types, schemas and styles of women's dress codes. These differences may be in the colour of the cloth, in how tight or short it is, or in the amount of make-up worn. All these factors require a finer distinction in women's public appearance than would be possible if the focus was solely on the headwear.

On the basis of my fieldwork in London with Iranian women and on my observations and experiences living in Iran until the age of 22, I have observed five general types of dress code. These are ideal types and they are fixed, but in order to achieve a better understanding and description of women's hijab and dress code, it is essential to have an analytic tool for categorizing different schemas by which women observe hijab in theory, if not always in practice. It should be considered a rough and useful heuristic rather than a totalising framework. Not every individual necessarily fits in only one of these categories at all times and places. Many of my interviewees have undergone transitions in their dress code, which I will discuss in detail in subsequent chapters. The five manners of wearing the hijab that I identify and will define and explain in the following pages are:

1. The "full traditional hijab" (which most commonly consists of *chador* or very long and loose *manto* with dark colours that covers the whole body except the face and hands with a headscarf that fully covers the hair)
2. The "full progressive hijab" (that is comprised of less-strictly-worn *chador* or more stylish *manto* with more attractive colours that covers the whole body except the face and hands with colourful headscarf that fully covers the hair)
3. The "partial-hijab" (in which the headscarf is worn but parts of the hair, head and neck is shown)
4. The "conservative scarf-less" (in which the head is not covered but short-skirts, low-neck tops or swimming suits are also not worn)

⁶⁷ *Manto* is a piece of clothing resembling a long shirt or tunic that Iranian women must wear in public. It can be short or very long, and tight or loose.

5. The “radical hijab-less” (in which religion is not a decisive factor for determining dress code in any way)

In subsequent chapters I explore the intentions behind and reasons and causes for choosing each type of dress code by my informants. For now, I will elaborate on each of the outlined terms.

Cross-cutting themes in variations of hijab

Before going into further descriptions of these different styles of hijab, I would like to return to the themes I identified in chapter Two (in the section of Muslim women as free agents). I had identified three major themes there which I briefly describe below:

- 1) The conception of hijab articulated within the oppression vs. protection (or immunity vs. restriction). This theme is promoted by two opposing forces: the conservative or traditional male-dominated society of Muslims and the Western protagonists of the emancipation of women who are informed by colonial ideas. They are mirror images of one another.
- 2) Choice and agency of women: adopting or relinquishing the veil has often been portrayed merely as a matter of choice. The exercise of agency is also tied to this concept. In reality, choice is far more complex than a mere display or expression of one’s desire. Sometimes, women reproduce the mentality of a patriarchal order without noticing they do not have much say in changing the circumstances of their life themselves.
- 3) Negotiating modernity and secularism: this theme is interconnected with the previous two. The concept of alternative modernities or multiple modernities sets women free from being trapped in a Eurocentric perception of modernity and secularism. At the same time, it gives the the confidence to exercise their agency in a European context without having to play by rigid perceptions of secularity.

These themes can be traced in all of the following styles of dress code to various degrees. One can traced them either in a positive light showing how women are aware of these or in a negative light where one can discern that, for

example, even though women might be viewing their dress code as a matter of their own choice, there is little critical reflection as to how this change is coming about.

Full traditional hijab

Women to whom this category applies come from different backgrounds, especially in their education and occupation. They can be medical doctors or homemakers. I know many women very well in Iran, including my own mother, who wears full traditional hijab. I know many fewer women who fit in this category in London. This category applied to only 3 out of 40 of my informants.



Figure 5: Image of *chador-rangi*, which full traditional hijabi women wear indoors.



Figure 6: Image of *chador-rangi*, which full traditional hijabi women wear indoors.



Figure 7: Image of the black *chador* that hijabi women wear in public.



Figure 8: Image of the black *chador* that hijabi women wear in public.

Yeganeh, age 52, is a very well-known gynaecologist in Tehran. She came to London six years ago to be with her two boys, who are both medical students. Although she has had a very successful professional life in Iran, she left everything behind to be with her children and she is not working as a doctor in London. She is currently taking courses related to her profession at the hospital.

On the very first day that I went to Yeganeh's house at the invitation of her son, I saw her with a *chador-rangi*.⁶⁸ She asked me if I wanted a *chador-rangi*. Traditional Muslim women most commonly wear hijab inside the house when there is a *namahram* (men who are not *mahram*) amongst the guests. When there is a *namahram* man amongst the guests (in this case her husband and sons that were *namahram* in relation to me), It is common for the female host to offer her guest *chador-rangi* upon her arrival—but I refused, as I was comfortable with my own outfit. Under her *chador*, she was wearing a large white scarf pinned below her chin, a long loose shirt, black trousers, and thick black socks. The way she held her *chador* is also noteworthy. Like the most traditional religious women in Iran, she held her *chador* in a way that in addition to the body, the head and hair, it also covered parts of her face including the lips, forehead and parts of the eyebrows. Generally, amongst the more religious, the *chador* is also used to cover the lips and the forehead. This act is called *roo-gereftan* or *roogiri* (that is, 'covering parts of the face').

The environment of their house reminded me of houses in Iran, even though still distinct to the diaspora. The smell, light, and decoration of the house were very similar to that of my aunt's house: very-well lit; all the walls full of Islamic art-works and family pictures; the smell of Persian rice in the air; and all the floors covered by Persian carpet (the reason why everyone took off their shoes before entering the house). I went to the kitchen to see if Yeganeh needed any help. The way she talked and behaved resembled many practicing Muslim women I know in Iran. After she entered the room, she sat on the floor, and while she covered parts of her face, she

⁶⁸ *Chador-rangi* is a brightly coloured *chador* with colourful prints. This kind of *chador* is very popular to wear indoors amongst religious women in Iran. Women who wear black *chador* outside the house keep the same type of *chador* for use in house, but the fabric and colours are different. Figure 5 and Figure 6 show an example of *chador-rangi*.

also participated in an on-going discussion with her sons. On the first encounter with her I found that she is a very knowledgeable woman. Although she was trained to be a consultant, she had left her career to take care of her children in London.

I subsequently interviewed Yeganeh in my home. She arrived wearing a very long loose dark blue *manto* and a big white scarf pinned under the chin. I asked her about what she wears in Iran and what she wears in London, and she said:

Since I was very young—perhaps seven—until now, I have worn chador. I don't wear chador here in London because it draws the attention of many people in the street, so I wear a very loose and long manto. It is very important for me not to draw any attention from men due to my appearance. I don't wear matching colours and I don't use any make-up. I believe that wearing make-up with hijab is a very silly act, because you wear hijab to be less attractive and sexy, and wearing make-up is precisely for looking more attractive, so it does not feel right to me. In London, it feels much more comfortable without chador. My hands are free and I can do my work much more easily here. When I go back to Iran, I wear the chador. Many people in Iran respect me because of my chador. This is so because they don't expect a consultant to wear a chador. I always attend hospital meetings with my chador, which impresses my colleagues. It is not common for female medical doctors to wear a chador.⁶⁹

As we can see in her response, the matter of wearing the *chador* is framed in the pragmatic needs of a Muslim woman. Even though she strictly follows the practice at home, she would refrain from doing so in public in London as it draws attention. This is contrary to the very philosophy of the hijab she believes in. It is meant to 'protect' the woman from the unwanted gaze of people. What immediately falls apart here is the 'sacred' importance which is attached to the *chador* itself. One can easily move beyond it. So, we can see that there is an element of agency here. The woman, albeit within the general prescribed norms often produced by male

⁶⁹ Interview with Yeganeh, conducted at Golders Green, 12/11/2012.

scholars, moves beyond a strict observance of the veil here. Yet, while she is in Iran, even though it is uncommon in the professional setting, she keeps to her *chador*: it is a marker of her conscious religious identity. Does the idea of the ‘sacredness’ of hijab change here? It seems to be yet again another manifestation of practicality. It is part of the peer expectations among the people she associates with in Iran. This practicality is fluid: it changes when she is in London.

Yeganeh precisely follows the most strict guidelines for covering in the mainstream traditional Shia *fiqh*: she covers all parts of her body except for her face and hands, and she wears something loose so that her figure and curves do not show (see Chapter Three for further). She strictly believes in observing these limits in any situation, and she obeys them fully. She is not a gynaecologist in London but she has taken some courses in the hospital. I asked her if she has had any problems shifting from her hijab in London, and she answered:

I feel very comfortable with the dress code I follow, and thank God, here in UK no one cares how you look, and they don't stare at you. However, at the hospital, where I am taking some courses, in the theatre room there are regulations requiring you to wear special clothes, and arms should not be covered. I usually wear long gloves for this course. During the break for lunch, we are not allowed to wear gloves or change the clothes, so I can't enter the break space because I cannot show my arms. For that reason, I usually stay outside the theatre room alone. This means that almost always I cannot take a break. I wait outside until all other doctors come out.⁷⁰

Yeganeh's account demonstrates how strictly women who adhere to this category believe and act regarding their hijab. Even in special circumstances they do not compromise the limits stipulated by traditional *fiqh*. They always wear *chador* in public and in private spaces when a *namahram* is present. The colours they wear are very simple and dark to minimise attention from men. We can see that even though she is flexible with the *chador*, other rules and conditions do actually

⁷⁰ Ibid.

restrict her social participation because she is convinced that this is how she must practice her faith. Such stipulations which have to do with a woman's body are still integral to the mentality of women in this category. It diminishes any active role of these women in challenging such norms. One can hardly see any feminist (Islamic or otherwise) engagement with such rules here.

Those women who fall under this category understand hijab not just as a dress code, but also as having a wider meaning. For them, the word hijab not only refers to the clothing that physically covers certain parts of the body (veiling), but also includes a set of rules concerning the behaviour and guidelines for interactions between the two sexes (*purdah*). As I mentioned in Chapter Three, hijab entails both the covering of the body (veiling) and the codes of behaviour with the opposite sex (*purdah*) the most important element of which is the separation of male and female spaces (see Papanek, 1973 for further).

The women who are closer to the full traditional hijab type observe *purdah* more seriously than the other four categories, although it is important to mention that they do not think women and men should be separated completely, as was the case before the modernisation of Iran. Many of these women work outside the home, and therefore they see hijab as a tool to attract minimal sexual attention and to be able to work next to men without insisting on their sexuality. Yeganeh worked at hospitals and has studied alongside men for a very long time back in Iran. She said:

I have studied medicine and have worked with men in hospitals. This is only for work, and I do not consider it appropriate to go out and talk with my male colleagues during breaks or spare time. I only talk and work with men when it is necessary to achieve a certain goal. Otherwise, it is not permitted for men and women who are "namahram" to talk or laugh. My husband does not like it if I talk to men without an important reason, and I do not like it as well if he chats unnecessarily with his female colleagues or secretary.

Unlike the next four groups, for women in this group, having a male friend who they spend spare time with and talk to or laugh with is unacceptable. Their preferred interpretation of Islam corresponds with teachings of traditional Shia

*marjas*⁷¹ and differs from that of the more progressive Muslim scholars. Therefore, women in this category are still not very open to mixing with men in spaces other than the workplace. For example, in many gatherings, women and men sit in separate rooms and have lunch or dinner at separate tables. Such arrangements minimise unnecessary encounters between the sexes. Nonetheless, women who work outside the home have frequent encounters with men, unlike their grandmothers, who were always inside the house. Under no circumstances do these women have any kind of bodily contact with men, including the shaking of hands. Even Yeganeh, who lives in London and works and studies in hospitals, will not shake hands with men.

This restrictive hijab practice may cause some social difficulties. For example, addressing the issue of shaking hands with men, Setareh, age 30, who is a third year PhD student in electrical engineering, said:

*I don't feel that much disadvantage in my hijab, but one of the things that really bothers me is what I will do in my viva. It is necessary to shake hands with the examiners, and I cannot do this because it's not permitted for us to shake hands with namahram.*⁷²

The women in this group are the ideal women of the conservative leaders of Islamic Republic of Iran. Their dress code and mentality fits the 'good lifestyle' prescribed by the government for the younger generation. The government has tried to depict and encourage this kind of dress code in the educational system and the media, and they have met with partial success. According to all available studies, a considerable portion of the population thinks and acts exactly in this way, although it is still less than what the government is aiming for.

It is also important to mention that women in this group are more judgmental and critical of those in the other four groups. Hijab is an important part of their life, and they filter their relations with others due to their conception of hijab. For

⁷¹ *Marja* means religious reference and refer to those clerics who have the authority to make legal decisions in the Islamic law for their followers. In Shia Islam after Quran, prophet Mohammad and the Imams, *marja* is the highest authority.

⁷² Interview with Setareh, conducted at North Finchley, 26/12/2012.

example, I know women belonging to this group who find it hard to even walk with someone in the street if they do not observe full Islamic dress code. They believe that if they walk next to someone who is not fully covered, it means that they are endorsing their way of dressing.

Those of my interviewees who belonged to this group clearly stated that their belief in and commitment to following the order of God as explained in the mainstream Shia jurisprudence is the main reason why they observe hijab so strictly. Their system of religious belief requires following a literal understanding of the *fiqh* as elaborated by the most senior traditional *marjas* in Qom or Najaf. In contrast, women who belong to the other four categories are more likely to follow the more progressive 'hermeneutical' approaches to *fiqh* developed by the contemporary revisionist Muslim scholars and reformist *marjas* (as discussed in Chapter Three).

Full progressive hijab

The women in this group are also practicing Muslims, but they differ from the first group in many aspects. They still follow the mainstream traditional *fiqh* as it relates to the dress code (veiling), while being flexible in passing some limits that the conventional *fiqh* has set for behavioural hijab (*purdah*). They cover all parts of their body and hair fully. They do not wear very tight clothes, and their clothing is long enough that at the very least their hips and thighs are covered.



Figure 9: Different styles of full progressive hijabi women dress code in London

The dress code for full progressive hijab and full traditional hijab mainly differ in the style of dress and colours used. In behavioural hijab (*purdah*), women in this group are much more open. They are comfortable in the company of men, and can be close friends with them or even shake hands with them if they initiate. Unlike the first group, the full progressive hijabi woman is situationally flexible, and they are at times willing to pass the limits that conventional *fiqh* has set for behavioural hijab (*purdah*).

Arezo, age 30, is currently a postdoctoral student in cosmology. She has lived in London from the age of 17 until today. I discuss her experiences in detail in Chapter Six because she has undergone a major transition in dress code from “conservative scarf-less” (non-hijabi) to “full progressive hijab”. I saw her at several formal and causal events and gatherings, and she always wore the same style of clothing. I interviewed her in our mutual friend’s house, where we went to an empty room. She was wearing a black tunic with jeans, a green scarf, and very light make-up. After we sat down, she took off her scarf. She looked very different and much more beautiful without the scarf. I asked her about the limits of her hijab and she responded:

I always wear manto or a long tunic and long sleeves, and never very tight clothes. I usually wear plainly coloured scarfs because it suits me better, and I fully cover my hair and neck with them. This is my typical dress code, regardless of where I am going. I don’t pass these limits under any circumstances—that is, I cover all parts of my body except my hands and face.⁷³

I asked her whether she thinks that hijab, as depicted in *fiqh*, is a religious obligation for all Muslim women. She replied:

I can’t say that covering all parts of one’s body except for the hands and face is obligatory for all Muslim women, but I can say it for myself. I think it is necessary for me, but for others it depends on each individual and the time and place they live in. This is the limit of my

⁷³ Interview with Arezo, conducted at Ealing Broadway, 1/12/2012.

hijab, because my appearance is very important to me, and if I free myself I will be more occupied with my looks. However, this may not be true for other women, and everyone should find their own way of being modest.

From my analysis of interviews of women in this group, I conclude that for them, hijab is more often a personal choice than a religious obligation. Although many of them do not believe in the limits conventional *fiqh* has set for women, they practice it for other reasons. The reasons they do this will be explored in more detail in Chapter Six.

Many women who I interviewed in this group wear *chador* when they go to Iran, although they are not very happy about it. They don't see *chador* as *hijab-e bartar* (the best hijab). I asked Shiva about the experience of wearing *chador* in Iran after she came to study in London, and she stated:

I still wear chador when I go to Iran, and every single time I say to myself, "Why am I doing this?" Although I have many objections, I can't convince myself not to wear it. Following the 2009 presidential election⁷⁴, many things have changed, and when wearing chador people look at you as if you are a supporter of Ahmadinejad's government. I don't want to be seen that way at all. When I go shopping or to the cinema, the looks that I receive give me the impression that I am not welcome at all. I really don't like the impression that wearing a chador gives, but at the same time, I cannot put it away. This is because other people might say that I have become loose and less religious after studying in London. Therefore, I prefer to wear the chador since I don't want other people to think of me in that way.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ After the disputed 2009 presidential election in Iran the society became very much divided between the supporters of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (who was officially announced the winner of the election) and supporters of Mir-Hossein Mousavi (Ahmadinejad's reformist rival who claimed victory and believed the results of the election were fraudulent).

⁷⁵ Interview with Shiva, conducted at Colindale, 16/10/2012

One can easily discern the effects of peer-pressure in her response. The desire is there to relinquish to *chador* and she does not find any rationale for wearing it any more. It is quite evident that if peer-pressure is lifted, she would be more comfortable in moving to other styles of hijab without tying it to religiosity. As Amer (2014) pointed out (discussed in chapter Two), the issue of choice is also about feeling comfortable with one's sense of belonging. It is clear that even though the terms of the practice of hijab is mainly set by the peers or the environment, once the atmosphere changes, these women would more freely welcome the shift.

Golnaz, age 27, has recently finished her PhD in biomedical engineering. She is a practicing Muslim observing all her religious duties according to the conventional *fiqh* and has a full progressive hijab. She said:

I didn't feel good about my chador when I was doing my BA at the University of Tehran. All of my female classmates were open-minded, and none of them wore chador. It took a long time for me to show them that I was not the kind of person they thought. They thought I was a fundamentalist Muslim supporting Ahmadinejad's government. After a while, I got closer to them and we became friends, but chador was always a barrier in communicating with other people at university. I like hijab, and it is very important for me, but I think chador is useless because it brings lots of social costs, and it is really difficult to handle when you want to use public transport. Also, it's heavy and becomes dirty because it is long and drags on the floor. Furthermore, the fact that chador is black causes its own difficulties.⁷⁶

This story exemplifies why many practicing Muslim women in Iran prefer to wear types of hijab other than *chador*. The major difference here between full traditional hijab and full progressive hijab is that the former group of women wear *chador* with complete informed consent, despite the fact that it is difficult for them, whereas the latter group wear it with doubt and dissatisfaction. The full

⁷⁶ Interview with Golnaz, conducted at Imperial College London, 19/7/2012

progressive hijabi woman knows that it is irrational to wear *chador*, but the force of discursive power relations (Foucault, 1995), obliges her to wear it; she does this because she wants to fit in with a group of modest women. Wearing a *chador* is at certain times the only way to show that you are very modest, although as we shall see later, changes are happening even in this regard.

As I mentioned earlier, another difference between “full traditional hijab” and “full progressive hijab” can be found in behavioural hijab relating to interactions between men and women who are *namahram*. The *purdah*, that is, the segregation of women’s and men’s spaces, is much less evident in full progressive hijabi women’s lifestyles compared to those of full traditional hijabi women.

One of my interview questions was about the effect of practicing hijab on becoming close friends with, travelling with, and shaking hands with men. All women in the first group refused to engage in any of these three practices. However, the women in the second group were much less strict in this regard. Some of the women in the second group usually shake hands with men if the latter put their hands forward first. They do not shake hands with men in Iran. Many of them have close male friends and spend time with men in the same way as they do with women. For example, Bita told me:

I am very happy with having this type of hijab, but one of the disadvantages—both in Iran because of my chador, and in London because of my scarf—is that my hijab sends this signal to others that they should keep their distance from me. This is a positive impression on some occasions, but in university, it has been negative for me. I am not the kind of person that they think I am. I really like to be close friends with many of my male classmates, and I already have close male friends. I always have to explain that this kind of hijab does not mean that I don’t want to have any contact with men⁷⁷.

Figure 9 shows different styles of veiling worn by full progressive hijabi women. They wear colourful scarves and clothes. They do not have any problem with

⁷⁷ Interview with Bita, conducted in Euston, 28/9/2012

looking beautiful in public spaces, but this was not to be interpreted as sexy, as Soraya explained:

Hijab does not mean to make yourself look ugly. There is a difference between looking beautiful and looking sexy. Some of my family and friends who are very religious think that hijab means being very normal and not wearing nice clothes. However, I think you can be modest and beautiful without being sexy and attracting sexual attention. I am very careful about what I wear all the time. I try to wear clothes in which I feel confident, but not clothes that are unusual and that cause everyone to turn their eyes toward me. I don't wear make-up, but I do wear colourful scarfs and matching clothes, and my friends like it. I don't look sexy, and this is what matters to me most, as opposed to making myself look ugly so that I don't draw attention.⁷⁸

Women who have full progressive hijab are much more socially integrated and have closer relations with other men. Their behavioural hijab is less strict. These women therefore combine both abiding by the conventional *fiqh* and being active in society. Regarding the relations between men and women, these women see hijab as a means to minimise their sexuality attractions in order to have good and healthy relationships with men. Soraya, a married woman, said:

I see hijab as a way to minimise my sexual attractions, but at the same time I do like to look beautiful. I have many male friends who are very close to me, like my female friends. The level of intimacy is strong, but the shape of it is different from the intimacy I share with my female friends. I hang out with them, even one-on-one, and my hijab helps me have a healthy relationship with my male friends and not to get engaged in sexual attraction, which I think is not ethical. I hate it when people say women and men should not laugh and hang out, because it implies that the first thing men see in a woman is her

⁷⁸ Interview with Soraya, conducted at SOAS, 26/12/2012

sexuality. I don't use make-up because if I wear make-up while I am talking to men, they might become distracted to how I look rather than my personality. I want them to see me as a human being and not as a sexual object. Although I am married, my husband and I are very welcoming toward my male friends and his female friends, because we have drawn lines for ourselves. I think if hijab has one positive effect, it is that it allows women to be present in more social spaces while remaining protected and comfortable, and not to be deprived of places where males and females mix.⁷⁹

Partial-hijab

As a child, whenever I saw a woman with parts of her hair showing beneath her scarf, I wondered why she did not cover fully. I believed that, by revealing her hair, she committed a sin that on the Day of Judgment would send her to hell. The state media and educational system in Iran advocate that by disobeying the conventional Islamic dress code of hijab, one may receive the worst otherworldly punishment in hell. Religious families raise their children based on this belief, instilled during the earliest years.

Many women in Iran are so-called *bad hijab* (improper covering) because the way they veil themselves differs from what the conventional *fiqh* prescribes. Due to the imposition of hijab, many women who do not believe in veiling have to veil when they enter public spaces. Many people thought, as I did, that anyone showing their hair outside of their scarf did not believe in hijab, and that if such women left Iran they would not wear the headscarf. After I came to the UK, I started seeing many women who did not cover completely but who were still partially veiled, as they had been inside Iran.

Partial-hijabi women generally wear a scarf, but their hair and neck is not fully covered, and their limits for covering other parts of body are less strict than in previous groups. Some show parts of their arm or below their knee but there is no

⁷⁹ Interview with Soraya, conducted at SOAS, 26/12/2012

general rule. Figure 10 depicts a woman following a partial-hijab dress code in London and Figure 11 depicts them in Iran. Their behavioural hijab is generally more open when interacting with men, but it depends on the individual. There might be cases where a woman wears partial-hijab but thinks much more conservatively than a woman who wears full progressive hijab. People who follow this type of dress code in the streets of Iran might not believe in hijab, but when you see someone with a scarf (partial-hijab) in London, it means that this person is voluntarily veiling, as discussed in Chapter Six.



Figure 10: Image of a partial-hijab dress code in London



Figure 11: Image of a partial-hijab dress code in London (the consent of women in the pictures has been obtained for the publication of their picture in this thesis)

Termeh, 26 is a graduate analyst at a well-known bank in London. She has attained a finance BA degree from Columbia University and MA degree from London School of Economics and Political Science. She believes that the partial-hijab dress code is a product of the Islamic Revolution. She commented:

I believe that if there were no Islamic Republic and consequent ideologies in Iran, women like me with bad hijab [incorrect covering] would not exist. That we wear something like this is a product of the Islamic Republic, and we are happy about it. I have friends who wear a scarf with hair showing. They may also dance in front of men, which is completely unexpected of a woman amongst religious people. Another friend told me that this type of partial-hijab is no good, because her mother does not approve of her. At the same time, my other group of friends who do not believe in hijab accept her. Women like my friend and I are suffering, because we do not belong to the groups of hijabi or non-hijabi women. We are mid-line. In Iranian society being a hijabi or non-hijabi means a lot. The two sides deny each other in order to define themselves. The hijabi side claims that we are pure and modest. They believe that partial-hijabi and non-

hijabi women are the same, in that they are loose women. On the other side, the non-hijabi women say that full hijabi and partial-hijabi women are oppressed by their men, or that they veil because of their father's job. Meanwhile, someone like me, who has a scarf and at the same time dances in front of men, becomes a target, because we deconstruct the game of hijabi/non-hijabi. It is just like the transsexuals, who have deconstructed the game of gender and who are the target of much criticism from both sides. Being a partial-hijab has its own advantages and disadvantages. Society pushes you to say where you stand. People don't allow you to be in the middle. Society likes drawing sharp lines and having boxes to put people in. It does not like people who don't fit into one of the categories and boxes. Many people say to me, "What is this you are wearing? You should either wear it completely or don't wear it at all." So far I've discussed the disadvantages. The advantage of this type of hijab is that women like myself have the option to hang out with both sides. We are a bridge between the two.⁸⁰

Termeh is quite sophisticated in her analysis of the situation. What becomes clear in approaches like hers is that it is evidently based on informed choice and active exercise of agency: a woman who practices the veil in some degree but is comfortable with dancing in front of men. It sounds like an oxymoron. If one were to view this from the perspective of Reza Gholami (2014), it appears like an example of 'non-Islamiosoty' but Termeh's self-identification is categorically at odds with such 'secular' readings.

As Termeh put it clearly, the partial-hijabis are the group that bridge between hijabis and non-hijabis because they transgress the divisions. Amongst my interviewees, partial-hijabis were the ones whose social and friendship networks transcend the hijabi/non-hijabi divide. Interestingly, most of those experienced a transition in their own hijab scheme from hijabi to non-hijabi went through a

⁸⁰ Interview with Termeh, conducted at Islington, 14/11/2012

period of being partial-hijabi between the two phases. In other words, partial-hijab often functions as a bridge both between hijabi and non-hijabi circles of friends and also between the hijabi and non-hijabi period of one's life.

Precisely describing what women in this group wear is not possible, because unlike the first two groups, they do not have fixed limits on their clothing. They do not necessarily abide by conventional *fiqh*, and the way they veil varies from case to case. Each individual must decide what to wear. However, to provide a general overview, one can say that they all wear a scarf on their head, but parts of their hair are out of the scarf. They do not wear short tops or very short skirts. They wear long-sleeved tops with trousers, even if the shirt is not long. They also wear make-up. Moving beyond a mere description of their attire, the more fundamental issue is their active individuality. The self-confidence which is quite palpable in their approach puts people like Termeh in an entirely different category. In the face of all odds, both from the context of traditional conservatives and from a liberal and secular setting in London where she would find difficulty finding in job, she has maintained her choice in a visible manner.

The behavioural hijab amongst this group depends on many factors. Generally speaking, this group is more comfortable interacting with men. For example, Termeh said:

Many women say that they veil to show that they are Muslim and to protect themselves from things like shaking hand or hugging. But the thing is, someone like me ruins this game, because nowadays I shake hands, and sometimes I even hug. Before I got my job I didn't do this, but after I got this job there was no other option for me. Sometimes my boss comes from New York and says hello, and I can't stop him from hugging me. My profession requires it. Therefore, the act of shaking hands or hugging when performed by someone like me may ruin the image of other veiled women.⁸¹

⁸¹ Interview with Termeh, conducted at Islington, 14/11/2012

In general, women in the partial-hijab category do not wear a scarf in order to look less attractive. Based on my own experience and from my interviews, I find that this type of hijab does not necessarily make an individual less beautiful than not wearing a headscarf. Their reason for wearing the headscarf has more to do with identity codes and social pressure from family members, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Six. For example Termeh said: "I even think I look more attractive with this partial-hijab compared to wearing the same clothes without the headscarf".

Mahsa, age 33, is a dentist who follows a partial-hijab dress code. She always wears trousers with short or long shirts, and with the front of her hair out of her scarf. She believes that behavioural hijab is much more important than veiling. She has many friends who veil very strictly but who flirt with men, as well as friends who are very open in what they wear but who follow behavioural hijab. In Mahsa's opinion, hijab as a dress code is legislated in order to tell women to behave in a particular way, and its purpose derives from behavioural hijab. In her words:

There are some people who are fully veiled, but the way they look at men makes them quite like a naked person. In contrast, while wearing a bikini, some people have hijab in their eyes, and you perceive that they are very modest. My own experience is that I should wear different clothes in different places. For example, when I want to go to Iranian gatherings, I always dress up much more conservatively, wearing long tunics and never a short shirt. The reason is that the gaze of Iranian men is different, and it makes me uncomfortable. In places that there are no Iranian men, if I take off my scarf I won't feel bad, although I definitely feel I am doing a sin. Although I wear a shirt and trousers in London, when I go to Iran I never take off my manto inside the houses of my family and friends, because I feel bad for the looks I get.⁸²

⁸² Interview with Mahsa, conducted in South Ruislip, 2/10/2012

Mahsa's comments show what women in this group choose to wear is partly born out of a sense of reciprocal or reflexive interactions, and does not specifically and necessarily come from women's views themselves.

I have presented only two examples of the partial-hijabi women who I interviewed, but I have tried to provide as representative an understanding of the characteristics of their hijab. Given the scope of my research, critically, I would point out that due to the imposition of hijab in Iran, we cannot infer from a woman's dress code in Iran whether she belongs to the partial-hijabi group or the non-hijabi group. Even women who do not believe in veiling appear in public in the partial-hijab dress code. However, outside Iran there is no compulsory dress code, and therefore it is possible visually to identify their group.

Conservative scarf-less

With each subsequent group, characterisation becomes more complicated because the limits to which they adhere are less fixed. Every woman in this group has her own understanding of hijab, but there are some unifying characteristics. 'Conservative scarf-less' refers to women who do not wear the headscarf but who still cover certain parts of their body. For example they will not wear a short skirt or conventional swimming costume. They might be practicing Muslims or they might not be religious, but they all believe in the virtue of modesty (*efaf*).

The women I interviewed in this heuristic group do not endorse the conventional hijab requiring covering all parts of the body except for the hands and face. They do still believe in hijab, though their definition is different. Hengameh, aged 30, has a postgraduate degree in international relations, and works in a bank. I met her at a café in London's Oxford Street. She wore a pink cardigan with a black skirt and thick tights. She wore very light make-up and her hair was quite short—below her ears. She is a practicing Muslim, and when asked whether she believes in covering according to conventional *fiqh*, she said:

I don't believe in hijab being obligatory at all. In my view, hijab is not physically covering the body and hair. I don't believe in this hijab. For me hijab is something internal. If someone has inner hijab, they will

*not wear very revealing clothes. I myself don't wear short skirts or sleeveless tops, and I am very careful about my breasts. I always wear high neck tops. I think that area is very private, and I feel bad showing it off.*⁸³

By internalised hijab, Hengameh means that the behaviour of women is the most important thing, rather than what they wear or how much make-up they wear. In this, she agrees with Mahsa, above. Behavioural hijab, which many of my interviewees mentioned, involves modesty in the way a woman looks at and interacts with men, as well as in her body language: it is not entirely about how much she covers herself. This category is, therefore, about the internalisation or embodiment of values associated with hijab in the conservative sense. In Muslim contexts, and especially amongst Iranians, the first thing women judge each other for are their dress codes. This form of judgement is criticised by many of the interviewees in this thesis.

Parisa, age 30, is a PhD student in Sociology. In our meeting, she was wearing a black turtleneck top, a long cardigan, a black skirt, and high boots. She had on very light make-up. Her hair was tied back in a simple ponytail. I asked her how she defines hijab, and she said:

I define hijab as modesty (efaf). If someone asks me what hijab should be like, I would not, in any sense, say that all women should dress as I do and not wear a scarf. At the same time, I would not say that all women should wear a scarf, because although I am a practicing Muslim, I don't see hijab in the same way it is defined in our conventional fiqh. I have a problem with this being obligatory for all Muslim women. The way I see and define hijab for myself is different from place to place. My definition and practice of hijab is different when I am in London, and when I travel with my friends. In general, I can say that there is no one fixed definition of hijab for me. What matters to me is modesty. Modesty is the essence of hijab, and it is the

⁸³ Interview with Hengameh, conducted at Oxford Circus, 9/10/2012

*dominant characteristic of hijab. In a sense, modesty is the spirit of hijab, and it determines what we should wear and how we should behave in different contexts.*⁸⁴

As I mentioned earlier, the limits of covering vary according to the different places these women go. For this group, there is still a fixed limit that they will not cross under any circumstance. This limit is the main difference between this group and the radical hijab-less group. Conservative scarf-less women do not wear low cut tops, and they will not wear shorts or skirts above their knees in any situation. Their dress code in Iran is much more conservative; they are more comfortable in London as they do not receive unwanted judgment or character evaluation. Mina, a 22 year-old lawyer, said:

*My dress code doesn't have anything to do with my religion. I see it as an ethical issue. If I wear concealing clothes, it is because I feel I am responsible not to dress in a way that makes men uncomfortable. For example, if I don't show my thighs, it is not because I think I would be committing a sin, it is because I see it as unethical. Therefore, when I go to Iran, although I don't believe in covering my hair even in private gatherings, I sometime wear a scarf. In the streets of Tehran, I wear very modest clothes and I don't wear make-up. Unlike in London, you get a lot of attention and bad looks if you go out dressed the way you would in London.*⁸⁵

Fereshteh is 22 years old, and is doing a degree in history. She has gone through a major transition in her dress code from full progressive hijab to conservative scarf-less that I will discuss further in Chapter Six. Describing the limits of her dress code at present, she said:

⁸⁴ Interview with Parisa, conducted at UCL, 1/11/2012

⁸⁵ Interview with Mina, conducted at Euston, 24/10/2012

The limit of my dress code depends on the place I want to go to. There is one rule that I always try to follow. I always dress so that my sexuality will not be the first indication of me as a person.⁸⁶

As was clearly stated by my interviewees in this group, their main reason to choose this form of dress code is more to do with morality than Islam. They believe hijab in Islam is all about modesty and not about specific universal religious limitation to what one wears. Generally speaking, in this group, relations with men are more easy-going and much closer. All the interviewees in this group shake hands with men. Some of them hug as well. They all have male friends, and believe in a healthy friendship with men.

It is apparent that different people define modesty differently. The limits of covering are also variable, especially for the conservative scarf-less group, in which there are no fixed lines. The image that every individual has of their body is very important in choosing what to wear and what limits are set by their understanding of modesty. For example, Sayeh, a 25 year-old PhD student in history, told me:

Through my entire life, my dress code has been the same, and I have never had a scarf except in public spaces in Iran, where it is compulsory. Although I don't veil, I believe in haya (modesty) in my dress code. I can't wear short skirts or very low neck tops. I am not even comfortable in changing my clothes in front of my female friends or my mum. To some extent, this is due to the feeling I have about my body, but at the same time I believe in covering as a way of showing modesty. Covering gives me peace and tranquillity but this does not mean that more covering shows more modesty for other people. In my case, it is good.⁸⁷

The type of dress code people choose does not necessarily connect to the religious or cultural beliefs that they have. The feeling and image that people have about

⁸⁶ Interview with Fereshteh, conducted at Oxford SOAS, 5/10/2012

⁸⁷ Interview with Sayeh, conducted in Paddington, 2/12/2012

their body is also very important. In Chapter Six, I discuss the relation between hijab and body image in more detail.

In all of the above categories so far, women are faced with the underlying issue of how their sexuality and femininity is viewed. All of them are aware of being targets of sexually motivated interactions. For them, observing the hijab may seem like a solution to this problem, but it does not always work (as I observed in the case of sexual harassment). As we can see, when a woman is viewed as a sexual object and eroticism becomes a driving force in male-female interactions, neither approaches to the veil address the root cause of the problem: among Iranian men, the problem seems to persist. At least many women are convinced that 'culturally', Iranian men have this 'problem'. It is in this sense that the idea of hijab as protection comes into play.

What remains to be problematized is how and under what circumstances male members of a society view women as sexual objects. The next question is if this situation is peculiar to Muslim societies and Muslim men. Once we look at the issue in this context, yet again the centrality of hijab as a counteracting measure falls apart. With or without the veil, women may continue to be seen as sexual objects. This observation is present in the views of the last two groups about hijab. However, the interactions of Iranian women with various forms of hijab with eroticism and sexual conduct is under-researched. It is, however, beyond the scope of my research.

Radical Hijab-less

This category relates to women who are mostly non-religious, and who in theory do not believe in veiling. Their dress code depends on context and physical location. They wear clothes very much like a typical European women. The limits of their covering are much more flexible than the previous group. They might wear a short skirt, a sleeveless top or a bikini, depending on the situation and locale. Taraneh is an old friend of mine from my undergraduate days. She has been living in London since 2008, and has an MA in sociology. I have seen her wearing

different kinds of clothes, including shorts, low cut tops, and a bikini. In my interview with her I asked her to describe her limits for dress. She replied:

The only parts I would never ever show are my nipples and my vagina. Apart from that, I am comfortable wearing anything depending on the place and situation. I also have chubby legs, therefore I don't like to wear shorts very much, but sometimes I do wear them.⁸⁸

This quotation clearly shows that women who belong to this group dress free from any religious concern. Like it is common amongst women in general, the body image of my interviewees in this group is a pertinent factor in determining what they would wear. For example, Hasti, who is 27 years old and has a MA in gender studies, said that she does not believe in any limits in her dress code. However, because she has always been fat, she does not wear sleeveless tops or short skirts. In theory, however, she does not have a problem with wearing more revealing clothes. It is evident that the image individuals have about their body determines what they wear. It is evident that the choice of dress code of women in this group is determined by non-religious concerns, including their body image, rather than specifically Muslim discourses about dress code.

⁸⁸ Interview with Taraneh, conducted at Golders Green, 25/10/2012



Figure 12: Image of a dress code in Iran that could represent one of the following three types: partial-hijab, conservative scarf-less and radical hijab-less.

The women I interviewed in this group, like the conservative scarf-less group, have a more conservative dress code when they go to Iran than when they are in London. Fariba, age 27, has lived in London for three years and has a Master's degree in social sciences. She said:

Here in London I have many options in my clothing. Depending on where I go, I wear different clothes. I might wear short skirt or décolleté dresses. In London, I feel that no one judges me based on what I wear. The only thing I don't wear is a bikini, but I do wear a swimming suit. But when I go to Iran, I don't take many of the clothes that I wear here. In Iran, wearing clothes that cover more fully is a sign of respecting some of our old family members, and wearing a short skirt or low cut top does not give a good impression. In Iran, you are not free to wear what you like because people will judge you.⁸⁹

In Iran today, even in non-religious and secular families, wearing very revealing clothes is not always acceptable, and women might be judged negatively for it. Fariba, discussed above, belongs to a non-religious family, but as is evident, there

⁸⁹ Interview with Fariba, conducted at Golders Green, 1/10/2012

are still some restrictions upon her. The other women in this group who I interviewed also had similar experiences. They felt comfortable wearing many things where Iranians are not present, but they did not feel good wearing those clothes in front of Iranians or inside Iran.

Delara, aged 32, provides another perspective. She has followed many types of dress code, from conservative scarf-less to full progressive hijab, and after that to partial-hijab and again to conservative scarf-less. At the moment she may be described as radical hijab-less. The reasons for her historical or temporal transitions will be discussed in Chapter Six. For now I want to present her own words on this issue:

I don't have a specific limit for my clothing. Depending on where I go, I choose what to wear. I have had the experience of wearing a bikini at the beach in Dubai where I didn't know anyone and I was alone. But I didn't wear a swimming suit in a hotel in India. We were there with my Iranian classmates, and I didn't feel comfortable wearing a swimming suit in front of them. Also, I have been photographed naked, but I don't wear very revealing clothes in Iran, especially when I don't know the people attending. In front of my close friends, I am more relaxed and feel free to wear what I want. In general, the way I choose my clothes is very different when I am in Iran or in Iranian gathering compared to when I am in places like London or Spain.⁹⁰

Due to the imposition of hijab in Iran, many women suffer from not being able to wear what they are comfortable in. In addition, it is difficult to wear something they do not believe in and carry the burden of extra pieces like the *manto* or the scarf. Further, the way “the moral police”⁹¹ treat women who do not abide by Islamic rules is very tough for hijab-less women. Women in this group have the

⁹⁰ Interview with Delara, conducted at Tufnell Park, 20/10/2012

⁹¹ Moral police (*gashte ershad*) is the branch of police in the Islamic Republic of Iran responsible for fighting against those citizens who do not obey the conventional Islamic codes of dress and behavior with the other sex—for example, women who do not follow a proper Islamic dress code or women or men who engage in ‘improper interactions’ with the other sex. The moral police are located in important and crowded parts of the city, and they have large vans that drive around the city. They will first tell women to cover their hair, and if the women disobey they arrest them.

same type of dress code as partial-hijabis or conservative scarf-less women in public spaces in Iran. They always have to wear a *manto* and scarf. I asked my interviewees about their experiences of being in public in Iran with *manto* and scarf. Many of them said that from the time they were born this has been the obligatory dress code in public. They, therefore, do not feel the pressure since they have gotten used to the practice. For their mums it is more difficult, because they experienced a period before the 1979 Islamic Revolution when they were free to wear whatever they wanted, comparatively speaking. Every time this generation wants to go out, they feel the pressure of wearing a dress code imposed by the government. I also talked to some women who were under 30 years old but who were still not used to this obligatory law of dress for women. I asked my interviewees if they had encountered the moral police in Iran regarding their dress code. Hasti replied:

In Iran, I am not one of those girls with 'illegal' dress code, therefore I have never been noticed by the moral police. I dreamt as a kid that I would become a good lawyer or president. Because I was a person with this type of dress code and I was not a full hijabi, I believed these goals were not accessible for me, and only women with full hijab can aspire to that position. When I attended university I wondered why bad hijabi girls were engaged in political societies. I thought it was not their right in the eyes of Islamic republic to go into societies reserved for full hijabi girls. Women with this type of dress code have always been the "other" for the government, not insiders. This is the feeling of many hijab-less women in Iran, and it is the reason they might resent the full hijabi women. The government has always excluded them. Before the Islamic Republic, there was hatred from religious women toward women who appeared in public with a very open dress code. One of the results of the Islamic Republic is that this hatred has become bilateral. The non-hijabi women feel that the

*hijabi women have much more opportunity in terms of jobs and social advantages from the government, which they don't have.*⁹²

The relation between men and women for radical hijab-less women is much more open in comparison with the other groups, because most of them do not have religious boundaries regulating men and women meeting, and they do not believe in limitation with regards to *mahram/namahram*. All of the women I interviewed in this heuristic category shake hands with men. They are also open to hugging men and kissing them on their cheeks when greeting them. Many of them dance in the company of men. Even if they do not dance, it is not because they believe it is wrong. They do not do it because they do not like dancing, or because they do not know how to dance. They all have close male friends, and do not believe in separation between males and females. Their gatherings and parties are all mixed, unlike with the first two groups, where, for example, men and women at weddings are segregated. In general, the concept of *purdah* is absent in their lifestyle. Behavioural hijab also has a different meaning for this group. For example, laughing with a *namahram* might be perceived by a full traditional hijabi woman as flirting with men and as a sin, so according to her behavioural hijab she is careful not to laugh. For a radical hijab-less woman, the limits of behavioural hijab might involve not kissing a man (other than her partner) on the lips.

As we can see the most important marker is that religion in the sense of strictly practicing – or practice in any sense – is not part of the equation for determining dress code for these women. It is this group of people who might fit much more easily into the ‘non-Islamious’ category of Gholami (2014).

Notions of veil and interconnected themes

In what follows below, I will provide some of the dominant notions about hijab as Zib Mir-Hosseini (2011) has covered. They are briefly categorised under: 1) seclusion; 2) protection, 3) protest; 4) imposition; and 5) choice.

⁹² Interview with Hasti, conducted at Hendon, 18/10/2012

Mir-Hosseini (2011) presents and explores five notions of hijab in Iran. The first one is hijab as “seclusion” which mainly refers to pre-modern Iran, in which hijab was a means to exclude women from the social sphere completely and a kind of confinement for women. The second notion is hijab as “protection”, introduced by Morteza Motahari (2010), and it became the ideology of the Islamic republic after the 1979 Revolution regarding the issue of hijab. This explains hijab as a tool to bring women into society while protecting them from sexual harm. In this sense, the burden and responsibility is on women not to be provocative.

The third notion is hijab as “protest”, introduced by Shariati (1994). Unlike Motahari, Shariati did not engage with *fiqh* regarding the issue of hijab. He offered a new meaning for hijab: hijab as a symbol of protest against Mohammad Reza Shah’s regime, rather than hijab being a symbol of tradition. Shariati differentiated between two groups of women. The first group is of women who wear hijab because of tradition, imitating their mothers. The second group refers to women who chose to wear hijab by their own volition, against Westernised consumerism.

The fourth notion is hijab as “imposition”, which appeared after the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Due to the imposition of hijab, all women are obliged to wear a specific dress code and they will be arrested or punished in cases of disobedience.

The last notion of hijab presented by Mir-Hosseini is hijab as “choice”. She argues that, after all the debate around the notion of hijab in Muslim countries between feminists and Islamists who see hijab as oppression or as women’s liberty; it is important to illustrate that some hijabi women have chosen this dress code by their own volition and for their own reasons.

The five part schemas that I described in this chapter cannot be directly linked to one of these five notions, because not all women in my study practice hijab in London. Nonetheless, these notions can be used for most of the women who I interviewed. Hijab as “protection” is the most popular rationale for full traditional hijabi women, and to some extent for full progressive hijabi women. Full

progressive hijabi women can also be linked to the notion of hijab as “choice” and hijab as “protest”. Partial-hijabi women may embody hijab as protest and hijab as imposition. For the conservative scarf-less group, hijab is more of a choice, and for the radical hijab-less women, they wear hijab in Iran only due to imposition.

While exploring the reasons for following certain dress codes is not the aim of this chapter, which attempts to give a thick description of the features of each type of dress code, one point deserves mentioning here: religious belief is not the only determining factor in choosing what to wear. For example, a woman’s self-body-image, too, profoundly influences her decision to wear or not wear certain clothes. Self-perceptions of body size and shape might lead to wearing certain clothes. We cannot therefore attribute what people choose to wear only to their religious or women’s rights-related beliefs.

All full traditional hijabi women and full progressive hijabi women began wearing hijab from the age of nine (the age from which girls are expected to observe religious duties according to conventional Shia jurisprudence) or earlier (except those who have had a transition in their dress code). Partial-hijabi women started wearing a scarf at various ages depending on the shape of their body and the age of puberty.

In the hijab-less group there are people who think conservatively about men’s and women’s interactions with each other. Therefore not wearing the headscarf does not necessarily imply not believing in *purdah* or behavioural hijab.

In this chapter, I have described different dress codes of London-based Iranian women both when they are in Iran and in London. I have also problematized certain aspects of these approaches to hijab with some critical comments. As I mentioned earlier, not all women can be neatly categorized under one of these schemas. Nevertheless, it is necessary to lay out general characteristics and associations of women’s dress codes apparent amongst the Iranian diaspora before we can go on to enquire further into their dynamic relevance with respect to individual histories.

Different styles of head covering practised by Iranian women

As I mentioned earlier, the covering for the head, including the hair and neck, is the most important part of the hijab amongst the Iranian women both in Iran and in London. My informants who wear the headscarf follow varying covering styles. *Rusari*, *shal* and *maqnae* are the three different styles. I have previously referred to all of them with the word headscarf. Here I will define each in detail.

1. *Rusari* is the first and most popular style of headscarf worn by Iranians. It is a square piece of fabric made in different sizes, materials, and colours. Some hijabi women tie the *rusari* under their chin, as shown in Figure 9 by the first three persons from the right. Iranian hijabi women around the world are mostly recognisable as Iranian because they wear a *rusari* tied under their chin. Different nationalities follow different manners of wearing the *rusari*, and the most common and popular style amongst Iranian women is tying it. Another style is pinning the scarf to one side. This style is borrowed from the Lebanese, and in Iran it is called 'Lebanese style'. Most of the women from the first two groups wear the *rusari* in the Lebanese style, and to do so signifies having a stricter hijab.



Figure 13: Image of the Lebanese style of wearing a *rusari*.

2. *Shal* is the second kind of headscarf. It is a rectangular piece of fabric made in different sizes and colours. It is the same as the scarf that non-hijabi women use in cold weather to cover their neck, but hijabi women use it to cover their head. Arabs mostly use this style of headscarf, but Iranians also use it. Figure 10 shows a woman wearing *shal* that covers their hair fully. Figure 12 shows women wearing the *shal* in Iran who may either be partial-hijabi (in Iran and London), conservative scarf-less (only in Iran) or radical hijab-less (only in Iran).

3. *Maqnae* is a kind of scarf that is closed in front. It only comes in plain colours. Figure 14 shows a woman wearing a *maqnae*. In Iran, girls and women are required to wear *maqnae* at schools, universities and all governmental offices. In primary schools, it is mostly worn in white colour. In high school, universities and government offices, it should be darkly coloured (black, grey, brown, or dark blue). All of my informants have worn *maqnae* in Iran but I did not see any of them wear

maqnae in London. This shows that, aesthetically, women do not like the *maqnae*, because when they can choose what to wear, they never choose *maqnae*, although they have had to wear it most of their life in Iran.



Figure 14 - An Example of Maqnae

Conclusion

In order to understand why Iranian Muslim women in London have certain kinds of covering, and why they change after they moved to London, I have given a full description of the five schemas which I have identified. I have also provided both in this chapter and in preceding ones how social, political and religious factors and sensibilities have contributed to this shift. Shifts in the structure of political power after the demise of Ayatollah Khomeini, the rise of the reformist discourse, the Green Movement and migrations of the most recent generation of Iranians to Europe have all contributed to the social and political aspects of the issue.

This chapter explained each of these five schemas: full traditional hijab, full progressive hijab, partial-hijab, conservative scarf-less and radical hijab-less.

Although I have interviewed roughly the same number of women in each of the five schemas, the majority of the Iranian women who live in London belong to the last three categories (partial-hijab and especially conservative scarf-less or radical hijab-less) as they are less conservative and traditional compared to average Iranians living in Iran. Iranians in London are not generally known as hijabi women, and I myself have encountered many people who were surprised when I said I was

Iranian because of my headscarf. Although there are a considerable number of Iranian hijabi women in London, in general Iranians are not associated with hijab, unlike other Muslim countries. This is a sign of the fact that the majority of Iranian women in London do not wear the headscarf.

By describing the features of each of the schemas I have tried to provide a useful descriptive and explanatory tool that will enable the reader to have a better understanding of hijab dynamics amongst Iranian women in London. In the next chapter, I will go through the reasons behind each dress code and the reasons for transformations in dress code, using both the interviewees' own views and my overall understanding of the topic and its context.

Chapter Six: Hijab Rationales and Transitions through Life

Histories

Introduction

As a Muslim hijabi woman living in London, I am asked many questions about my veil and about why I observe hijab. Londoners ask, “Why do you hide under a veil? Why do you wear a scarf? Do you wear it at your house too? Can I see your hair?” Living in the Western world means that I hear these questions much more frequently, because most people are not familiar with the intimate and daily practices of veiling. Moreover, the political climate of the past two decades has further complicated the issue as Afshar (2008) also notes.

In an Iranian context, the word hijab immediately evokes associations with the headscarf. A hijabi woman is most often envisioned as a person who wears the headscarf, and in the eyes of many Iranians, a woman who follows all codes of hijab but who does not wear the headscarf is non-hijabi. In fact, hijab is far more than the headscarf and the correct covering for the body. Hijab is a set of rules and behavioural codes that I have discussed throughout this thesis. I have explored some of the political, social and intellectual contexts of these associations in chapters Two, Three and Four.

In Chapter Five, I provided a thematic perspective elucidating approaches to protection vs. restriction, choice and agency and problematizing concepts of modernity and secularity and I have extensively discussed the literature about these interconnected themes in chapters Two and Four. Also, I described categories of five dress codes that I find to be a useful heuristic when interpreting my informants’ choices of clothing and the causes and rationales for these choices. The five categories of dress are: 1) ‘Full Traditional Hijab,’ the strictest form of covering; 2) ‘Full Progressive Hijab,’ which is more colourful and relaxed but still completely follows mainstream traditional Shia jurisprudence; 3) ‘Partial-Hijab,’ referring to women who wear a headscarf but do not cover all parts of their hair and neck; 4) ‘Conservative Scarf-less Hijab,’ referring to women who do not wear a headscarf but restrict their dress in other ways; and 5) ‘Radical Hijab-less,’ referring to women

who do not believe in limiting what they wear (based on religious rulings), although in practice they may or may not be comfortable in revealing clothes.

In this chapter, I highlight my informants' understanding of their hijab practice and the transformation of their dress code, often in their own words. Even women who practice the same scheme of dress might have completely different reasons for doing so.

Addressing this issue, one has to separate two sets of questions. The first question is why women who believe in Islamic dress codes have such different schemas of dress and limits to their practice. In other words, the question is about problematizing unified and singular perceptions of 'Islam' and self-identity. What is prominently important here is the shift from 'Islam' as an abstract idea to which many interpretations may be attributed to 'Muslims' (in plural) which also includes Muslim women, who have brought in their own voices and choices in determining the dress code. One of the key points in this discussion is how one can move from viewing 'Islam' which is synonymous with *fiqh* (which gives rulings for every single aspect of a Muslim's life in a maximalist manner) to a civilizational, more humanistic idea of being a Muslim. The problematic side of this issue is that Islam as manifested in jurisprudential rulings, even when some scholars speak of the dynamism of *ijtihad* in *fiqh*, supersedes other manifestations of Islam which may be best seen in literary, poetic and philosophical traditions which have developed over centuries in Muslim societies. The works of Lenn Goodman (2003) and George Makdisi (1990) give us a much wider and more inclusive perspective into the multifarious genres, different from the jurisprudential approaches that have dominated the intellectual discourses in Muslim societies at the expense of non-jurisprudential aspects of Islam.

The second question is to what extent women within the same scheme have different motives and rationales for their practice. The most general conclusion derived from my fieldwork is that women follow a certain dress code either because of their beliefs, motivations, or an element of obligation or coercion. I will provide examples for each of these categories in this chapter.

A second general way of categorising reasons for hijab is as follows. The first four dress codes are followed by women who have specific but varying limits for covering their body. They do observe hijab, but do so in different ways. There are at least six general reasons for their observance.

Hijab as an ethical duty

Viewing hijab as an ethical duty is deeply rooted in a jurisprudential articulation of faith. The most prominent element in such perceptions of hijab is the role of the classical religious authority of the *faqih* in describing religious duties. One can hardly see deviations in this approach from a jurisprudential perspective to a more humanistic one. Therefore, ethics is closely tied with what religion is meant to prescribe in terms of rituals. As I briefly mentioned above, humanism is much less present in such approaches. This jurisprudential approach is not reflective of all the more complex theological debates about the primacy and priority of ethics over religion. Such discussions are present in the works of people like Fanaei (2005) among Iranian scholars, but they are not part of the mainstream discourse about the relation between ethics and faith as such.

Hijab as legal requirement

State law in Iran is one of the most influential reasons for dictating the terms of dress code in Iran. Even though the general blueprint of the Iranian constitution was based on the French model, the introduction of Islamic principles in the constitution was followed by a jurisprudential interpretation of Islam. Here, there is an interplay between the secular and the religious. A constitution which deals with political power is infused with religious elements which provides broader prescriptions about the lifestyle of citizens in Iran. Citizens who make a distinction between the political nature of the state and its religious aspect may reduce the practice of hijab to a legal requirement. Even if they are not happy with it, they are forced to observe it by law. Those who do not make this distinction and believe in the inseparable nature of politics of the state and religion, would have to live with the uncomfortable tension that arise at different times when state policies become stricter or looser.

The inevitable consequence of this politicisation of religious rulings is the increased disillusionment of a new generation of 'practicing' Muslim women with such norms.

Expediency and aesthetic preferences

Apart from conforming legal requirements, playing by the society's customs is another driving force behind variations of hijab. Within these limitations, women have gradually developed their own aesthetic preferences too, while at times out of expediency, they observe different forms of hijab depending on the context. When they are at work, they may have to observe the legally prescribed norms but the moment they leave work space, they freely move to a dress code with which they are more comfortable.

I will provide examples for each of these and break them into smaller sections in the following paragraphs. Women may have one or more of the reasons above. For example, an individual can observe hijab both because she sees it as a religious obligation and out of ethical duty. Here, the boundary between ethics and religious obligation is blurred. There is no conscious problematisation of being ethical and being religious.

Another reason for observing hijab that is especially prominent amongst women in the diaspora is to use hijab as a statement of identity or a form of political protest. Showing that you are a Muslim has more function in Western countries because Muslims are in the minority and hijab becomes more a matter of identity. Political protest led many Iranian women to observe hijab before and after the 1979 Islamic Revolution both in and outside Iran. Many of my informants mentioned that their mothers or aunts began wearing hijab before the Revolution to protest against Reza Shah's dictatorship. By political, here I refer to conventional politics. I do agree with some feminists (e.g., Hanisch, 1969) that personal life can be seen as political, even though I agree there are important connections between personal and political life.

Hijab practice can provide a sense of security to the women who wear it. Amongst the Iranian diaspora in London, many stated that they feel more secure wearing full hijab when they walk in the streets of Tehran, while in London they do not see security as a reason for observing hijab.

Another important reason behind having or not having hijab can be to fight against an inferiority complex, which is related to the 'class' dimension of hijab. Only one of my informants mentioned that the reason she removed her hijab was that she wanted to be like those women who belong to the upper class and do not wear a scarf. After Reza Shah's unveiling order in 1936⁹³, hijab became a sign of the working class (contrary to what we find in MacLeod's study of the women of lower-middle-class in Cairo), and non-hijabi women were associated with modern and high-class elite. Both before and after the 1979 Revolution, many Iranian movies and television serials depicted poor women wearing *chador*, and rich and educated women following a relaxed or 'partial-hijab' dress code.

A final, very general way of categorising the rationale behind each scheme of dress code is to divide them into individualistic reasons, religious/jurisprudential reasons, and socio-political reasons.

All these different classificatory systems can interact and overlap. An individual can have a mixture of different reasons. In the following sections, I demonstrate the contexts and differing rationales for each scheme of dress in the lives of my informants, and feature the personal stories of individuals who have experienced transitions in their dress code throughout their life history.

Individualistic Reasons / Reasons of Expediency

Many of the informants mentioned reasons behind their dress code that could be categorised under individualistic reasons and also expediency. By expediency (*maslahat andishi*), I mean that it is done in order to benefit the person. This benefit could be spiritual, worldly, or both.

Khatoon, age 26, is married and has a master's degree in law. Her current dress code can be classified as 'full progressive hijab'. In the past, she transitioned from non-hijabi to partial-hijabi, and after that to full progressive hijab. She usually wears a

⁹³ The banning of hijab, also known as the unveiling order, was legislated in 1936 during the period of Reza Shah's kingdom. According to this law, women were not allowed to wear *chador* (a long round shape black fabric covering from head to toe), headscarf, or *piche* (a face veil) in public. The state police forcibly removed the hijab from women who appeared with them in public.

scarf with a tunic and trousers. She told me that she agrees with the limits *fiqh*⁹⁴ states for Muslim women, but at the same time, she does not see these limits as an Islamic obligation for everyone. I asked Khatoon about her reasons for veiling and her answer, which relates to personal belief, was as follows:

I think that when women limit themselves in the way they wear clothes, this physical hijab transmits to their behavioural hijab as well, if they know why they are doing it. It is not only about what you wear. It could also be not using lipstick in some places. Observing hijab would only be valuable for me if I wear it with attention and not because of habit. It should be observed because you want to put limits on yourself to become stronger. When I started wearing a full hijab, I sometimes thought that I would be more comfortable without the scarf. But I asked myself what would happen after I took off my scarf. I might feel more comfortable wearing sleeveless tops, and then after a while all clothes will become normal for me, and I will lose all the hijab I have. I think this is dangerous for my life. In my view, the nature of women is different from men, and the reason women should veil is not to make it easier for men not to be attracted to women. Women should veil for their own sake, and I veil for my own good and not for men. I think pleasure for men is in looking, and that is why Islam has advised men to have hijab in their eyes. It means that they should be careful about what they look at. But pleasure for women is different. Women like to be admired and show their beauty, and it is a pleasure for them to be caressed by men. Therefore hijab for women means to hide their sexual beauty and coquetry.

The reasons Khatoon mentioned were very interesting and different from those of the rest of women whom I interviewed or I know myself. She is aware of her sexuality and eroticism seems to be quite present in the way she

⁹⁴ According to Mir-Hosseini (2000b), there is a distinction between *fiqh* and *sharia* regarding the concept of law in Islam. Muslims do not usually distinguish between these two terms. *Sharia* refers to revealed law about the blueprints of mankind for both this world and the other world. *Fiqh* refers to jurisprudence, meaning understanding and knowledge. *Fiqh* is the intellectual activity that tries to discover the divine blueprints, bring rules and legal systems out of these divine terms, and enforce duties upon the believers.

relates to her dress code. Hijab appears like a strategy for regulating issues of sexuality and erotism for her. Unlike some of the informants, she observes hijab only for herself and her own good. It is common for Iranians to wear hijab to protect themselves from the gaze of other men. But for Khatoon, hijab is a way of protecting herself from being attracted to other men. Hijab has a benefit for Khatoon: her mental calmness. That is why I have drawn upon her as an example of expediency and individualistic motivation which is evident in the following quotation from her. The narrative we find below is peculiarly conscious of sexuality:

In our culture, to attract the opposite sex, men are told to be nice and to caress the women they like, and women are advised to wear fancy lingerie in front of men. Pleasure for men is to look, and for women it is being looked at. No one recommends that a man walk naked in a fancy dress in front of his partner to provoke her, but they recommend that women wear fancy lingerie. I like to be beautiful, and to be admired for my beauty as a woman. I think that without my hijab I look more beautiful, and therefore my behavioural hijab will be weaker. By wearing hijab, I don't let other men be attracted to me, and as a result I won't be attracted to them. My beauty will be kept for my own family, and only my husband will pleasure me, and this will reinforce our bond and family welfare, which is important to me. The real reason I observe hijab is not to be attracted to men who find me beautiful, because that will harm my mental health. Hijab preserves pleasure for the family. Some might say that if I don't wear hijab it will not harm me and therefore that is okay, but I think people have to be like robots in order to stop themselves from enjoying someone looking at their beauty, and that could lead them to lose any sexual interest. For me, being cold and robotic is not possible. That's why I choose to wear hijab. What happens if one day I have a crush on another man and I am married? It might lead me to be cold with

*my husband or to betray him. Therefore, hijab helps me protect my family and enjoy the relationship I have with my husband.*⁹⁵

The above narrative provides a starkly 'secular' approach as it is not driven by or predicated on the conventional jurisprudential ruling. The fact that the idea of 'sin' is here shifting to preserving one's mental health or family bond gives the entire narrative a totally this-worldly dimension. In this sense, it is quite 'secular' by any definition.

Pegah also provides an answer that can be categorised as an individualistic reason. Pegah, age 29, is married and has a PhD in medical engineering. At our interview she was wearing a slightly tight brown cardigan with jeans and a scarf. The front part of her hair was out, and she wore light makeup. Her scheme of dress was 'partial-hijab.' In discussing her hijab she raised a number of issues but the one that exemplified individualistic belief is demonstrated in the following response:

*My dress code is a mixture of different elements, but the most important thing for me is modesty. In different societies, modesty is understood differently. The rule I follow in my dress code is not to attract attention. I don't want to get sexual looks from men, and I feel cheap if I do so. I don't need a stranger's endorsement of my beauty. In addition, this hijab helps me to prevent myself from committing other sins, and this is very important to me. With hijab, I feel like myself. I have become used to it, and that is why I am comfortable with it.*⁹⁶

Yet again, reasons provided here are not inspired by a religious perception of morality. It is a this-worldly articulation and explanation of her choice of dress code. This individuality is not only reflective of a secular attitude to hijab but also represents an agency which is not highlighted or overtly identified.

Many of the women I interviewed said that they feel comfortable with hijab. The question, then, is what led them to feel like this. In response, one could argue that in

⁹⁵ Interview with Khatoon, conducted at Southgate, 16/09/2012

⁹⁶ Interview with Pegah, conducted at North Finchley, 25/12/2012

a society where only women who wear the full hijab are recognised as modest women, not wearing hijab for modest women will be uncomfortable. In religious families like my own, girls who wear full hijab are rewarded and encouraged from a very young age. A child that wants to be rewarded therefore presumes that wearing a full hijab is the only way to be a good girl.

Another example of a rationale I identified as individualistic belief is from Shiva aged 26, who wears 'full progressive hijab'. Although she has full hijab according to *fiqh*, she does not see it as a compulsory Islamic rule for all women. In answer to my question about her reasons for her dress code she stated:

I think hijab is not a compulsory rule in Islam. My hijab makes my life better and easier, and this is why I wear it. It is my lifestyle. I wear it because I like to wear it, and not because I am forced to do so. Hijab has made my life better in many ways. I feel very comfortable with my hijab. I think that I gain more respect when wearing full hijab, and this dress code adds to my hormat (dignity).⁹⁷

Shiva's narrative of seeing the veil as part of her dignity and social conduct is once again making jurisprudential considerations obsolete and redundant even though in letter it seems compliant with rulings of *fiqh*.

From my own experience growing up in Iran, I can clearly understand what Shiva means about being more comfortable in full hijab. Sometimes the only way to show that you are a modest women and to protect yourself from the gaze of men is to observe the full hijab. This seems problematic; because Iranian society has reached the point that most men think that if a woman does not wear full hijab they have the right to sexually enjoy looking at her. Many women prefer to wear the *chador*⁹⁸, not necessarily out of personal belief, but to protect themselves from unwanted encounters with men that are sexually intrusive.

⁹⁷ Interview with Shiva, conducted at Colindale, 16/10/2012

⁹⁸ *Chador* is a black full body-length fabric that some women wear in public. It is open in front, and they hold it with their hands. *Chador* is known as the most rigorous traditional way of observing hijab amongst religious people.

Soraya, age 26, is a PhD student in sociology, and she wears full progressive hijab. She specified the following reason of expediency of hijab for her:

I don't think that hijab is an Islamic obligation for Muslim women, but I myself wear hijab. The main reason that I wear it is because it helps me in my spirituality. It gives me power over my nafs (egocentricity). It diminishes my attention toward my body. Wearing or not wearing hijab makes a big difference in my appearance. With a scarf, I look less attractive, and I feel good about this, but not because it will prevent men from looking at me in a bad way. I think that sometimes if you put yourself in challenging situations, like wanting to look beautiful but not doing so, it will empower your soul. Hijab, for me, is a way of practising my spirituality. Hijab, for me, is not only covering certain parts of my body and my hair: it is how I present myself and what kind of clothes I wear. For example, if I wear makeup, I will look more beautiful. However, because I wear hijab, I don't wear makeup because I don't want to be noticed—not for other people, but for my own good and my own soul. I always try to be normal and not to draw attention. Being normal is dissimilar in different societies, and the way I dress up in Iran is different from the way I am in London. Sometimes I think that if I wore a red scarf I would like it because everyone would look at me and say, "She is beautiful." This is not good for my spiritual wellbeing.⁹⁹

These spiritual reasons can be categorised as individual reasons for hijab. Although the underlying reason is spiritual, Soraya frames this in terms of its benefit to her—that is, hijab helps her pay less attention to her body, which she values. Spirituality is however viewed in entirely non-jurisprudential terms. It may as well be categorised as a 'secularised' version of religiosity which is released from the grips of institutional authority.

⁹⁹ Interview with Soraya, conducted at SOAS, 26/12/2012

Termeh, aged 26, wears partial-hijab, and regarding the point that Soraya raised about the spiritual reasons behind her hijab, Termeh said:

I have seen many full hijabi women who talk about having hijab because of spiritual matters and caring less about their body. But if they want to play this game, they should also wear hijab in front of women. In my view, hijab is about sexuality and about forbidding people from having sex with ones they are not allowed to. Connecting hijab with spirituality is very risky, because in that case it should be worn in front of everyone, and not only men.¹⁰⁰

Termeh is practically exposing the inconsistency of attributing a spiritual element to hijab. Connecting the hijab with sexuality, however, does not make the issue any less problematic. It displays a more structured gender bias in which the feminine body is hostage to stereotypes of sexuality.

Soraya raised a point that could be seen as her response to Termeh's concern:

Hijab concerns caring less about my appearance in front of both men and women. I do not only care about being modest and wearing ordinary clothes in front of men. I also have this concern in front of women. For example, if I go to a wedding party, I don't want to wear something that draws everyone's attention. Even getting too much attention for my appearance and beauty from women is unwanted for me. I always like to be ordinary, and also don't like to wear very revealing clothes. Even for my own wedding, I didn't wear a décolleté dress. Also, I don't wear too much makeup. Of course, the level of covering is higher in front of men, but I have my own limits, even in exclusively female gatherings.¹⁰¹

The limits that Soraya speaks about doesn't find its reference point in jurisprudence. Nor does it identify with a 'spiritual' desire. It is more about social conduct and how a woman may feel comfortable with her body and her appearance. Here, the

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Termeh, conducted at Islington, 14/11/2012

¹⁰¹ Interview with Soraya, conducted at SOAS, 26/12/2012

distinction between men and women fades away and with it the central focus of hijab being a means of segregation between men and women becomes irrelevant.

In this section, I have provided examples of individualistic and expedient reasons for hijab observance, which in effect de-sacralise religious pronouncements about norms and limits of dress code. The personal reasons cited by non-hijabi women are mostly about their comfort and about being themselves. Many of my informants across all schemas of dress code said that they follow a certain kind of dress code because they have become used to it, and they are comfortable with it because they grew up that way. Therefore, it is an issue of stepping out of one's comfort zone rather than suggesting a feeling of guilt connected with other-worldly considerations.

Another set of reasons that can be categorised under expediency is related to social, professional and political benefits of wearing or not wearing hijab. Hijab is not always or only about costs; it can also be a source of 'symbolic capital' that can be translated into political, economic, cultural and social capital in a network of religious families and ties within an Islamic society that is governed by an Islamic state. A number of my interviewees would not have been able to marry their current husbands (whom they loved), enjoy their current close friendships and have their current job or social and economic status if they had chosen a different way of dressing/hijab.

Custom and Culture

The term 'cultural' has a complex history within anthropology that makes it challenging to use. Many anthropologists have criticised using the term. I use culture here because it is a term used by my informants.

It is essential to differentiate between reasons and causes behind each type of dress code. By reason, I mean each individual's personal rationale for how they choose to define and defend what they wear and how they behave. By causes, I do not mean what people themselves mention as the reason, but rather what actually led them to act in a certain way and follow a certain dress code. Not all causes are consciously known for the agents, and not all the reasons an agent mentions are, in practice,

what actually led her to behave and dress as she does. In this section, I will discuss cultural factors including educational systems, media, norms, workplace standards, and pressure from strangers that can be the reason and/or cause behind one's way of dressing and hijab.

Out of the 40 women who I interviewed, two of them mentioned culture as one the main reasons for their dress code. The first is Nazanin, age 28, who is married and has a master's degree in architecture. She has lived in England for 6 years. Her dress code is full progressive hijab, with very colourful clothes and headscarf, and light makeup. In answer to my question about her rationale for hijab, she said:

One of the reasons that I observe hijab is that it is a part of the culture that I have grown up in. Asking why I wear hijab sounds like asking me why I eat Iranian cuisines. The answer to both questions is the same: because it is my culture. I don't wear a headscarf because of my religion in any sense, although I am a religious person. The reason people wear hijab from a religious point of view is to protect them, and I think that this hijab doesn't give protection. If you wear a black abaya [a very long black dress], it might provide protection, but you put a barrier between yourself and society. This protection has no use, although practically speaking it provides protection. I have always wanted to present a positive image of Muslim women in my workplace by wearing nice clothes, and I think I have been successful. The most important reason for the type of dress code that I have is my culture. I see it a matter of culture and not religion because I have experienced the worst impure and dirty looks from men in religious settings. At that point, I realised that hijab doesn't necessarily protect women, because there are men who are labelled as religious and yet offer these impure looks toward me. For example, in the holy shrines, this feeling is extreme for me. I believe that there is no difference between a woman who doesn't observe Islamic hijab but has a

*modest dress code and myself as a hijabi woman. Therefore, I cannot call my dress code a religious act. It is a cultural practice.*¹⁰²

Nazanin's response reinforces the points I made earlier: the sense of belonging to religion, as an all-encompassing worldview which can even determine your dress code is replaced by a sense of belonging to a community which incidentally happens to share some of these norms. Wearing the veil is essentially incidental to Nazanin's lifestyle. It means that if she was born into a different society, she might have easily followed the predominant norms of that society. This may seem like a truism but the underlying element is a shift from viewing religion as a maximalist set of rules and rituals to viewing religion as a minimalist system of values. Abdolkarim Soroush's articulation of the difference between maximalist and minimalist religion can vividly explain this point (Soroush 2009, pp. 93-117)

Termeh, discussed above, also mentioned that culture is one the main reasons for her dress. My interview with Termeh was very long and rich. She has had a lifelong deep engagement with the issues surrounding hijab, and although currently she follows a partial-hijab dress code, it is likely that she will become a non-hijabi. She has faced many difficulties finding a job, and in her new job, she is under pressure because of her headscarf. Despite these concerns, she still observes hijab, but not very strictly. When describing her reasons for still being observant, she stated:

Although I have many criticisms of hijab, the main reason that I wear hijab is my cultural background. Honestly speaking, I don't feel good about wearing a headscarf, but I have to admit it has become a habit for me, and giving up habits is not easy. I don't see my beliefs as anti-Islamic, but I want to reform and show that there are different ways of understanding and seeing Islam. My hijab is also a form of social activism. In the presence of Islamophobia in this society, I want to stand out and say, "I am a Muslim, but I don't think like the fundamentalists, and you can come and talk to me." I cannot see myself as someone who fights against capitalism because I do wear

¹⁰² Interview with Nazanin, conducted at Hanger Lane, 12/12/2012

*and use commercial brands, but I like the way some women use hijab as a sign of resistance and protest against capitalism and consumerism.*¹⁰³

Given Termeh's experience, if one assumes that Islamophobia became further marginalised in European societies and less intrusive into the lives of Muslim women, people like her would find little motivation to continue with the form of hijab, however much less strict, that they already have. One can clearly see the role of the politics in which these women have had no role. Women like Termeh have had no say in determining the direction of such discriminatory and often racist policies. Hence, their reaction to a policy for which they have had no choice or agency reflects itself in a dress code which is the product of their own reflection and active choice.

Having considered the two informants who mentioned 'culture' as key reasons for their dress code, I will provide an example of the role of norms, customs, and educational systems on what interviewees wear. Fariba is 27 years old, and comes from a non-religious background. She follows a radical hijab-less dress code. She has lived in London for three years, and came here to get a master's degree. She does not have a problem with wearing revealing clothes in London, depending on where she goes. However, in Iran, her dress code is more conservative and she will not wear very short skirts or low-neck tops. When I enquired about this choice, she answered:

The most important factor in my choice of dress code in Iran is the social education that I had as a kid, growing up in an Islamic environment like Iran. For example, when I attend a place where everyone wears a headscarf, it is not hard for me to wear a headscarf, and sometimes I don't even question it. But for someone who has not lived in such a place, wearing a headscarf might be very difficult. For example, in London I didn't feel good about eating during

¹⁰³ Interview with Termeh, conducted at Islington, 14/11/2012

Ramadan¹⁰⁴ because for 25 years I didn't eat in public places¹⁰⁵, although I didn't fast myself. This background shapes the limits of covering that I follow in my own dress, because I have lived in Iran. I have become used to being told what to wear and what not to wear, both by the government's moral police and even by my own family, who are not religious.¹⁰⁶

Here is a very vivid example of a woman who actively challenges the prescriptions of dress code, whether it is by the state or by family. It is an active, even though probably unconscious effort to get released from the grips of any authority. The individuality and agency of woman becomes central here. This example is however not a reflection of the overall attitude of other women, but as we can increasingly see signs of turning hijab into a more neutral territory, in all likelihood the centre of emphasis may as well shift towards a more personal narrative of dress code.

Religious and Jurisprudential Reasons

When asked why they are wearing hijab, most hijabi women's first response is to state that it is a religious requirement. According to the traditional mainstream Shia *fiqh* (jurisprudence), women are obliged to cover all parts of their head and body, except for their hands and face. The majority of Shia jurists believe in this limit. Some jurists have defined a different limit for Islamic dress, and I describe these exceptions in detail in Chapter Three. As a result, Muslim women who practice hijab for religious reasons can still have varied practices, and this is true amongst my informants. Despite these shifts and the anomalies one finds in such prescriptions, what tends to be implicit in all these approaches by women is the significant distinction between ethics and religion, which I briefly discussed above.

For many people, that a woman is veiled is sufficient to conclude she is practising hijab because of her religion. This is true in many cases, although as I have shown in

¹⁰⁴ *Ramadan* is one of the Islamic calendar months, during which Muslims from all around the world fast. Fasting is one of the five pillars of Islam, and it is obligatory for all Muslims except the ones who are ill or travelling. Fasting lasts from dawn in the morning until the sunset of the same day, and observant Muslims should not eat, drink, smoke, or have sexual intercourse during the fasting period.

¹⁰⁵ In Iran, it is illegal to eat, drink, or smoke in public places during the month of *Ramadan*.

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Fariba, conducted at Golders Green, 1/10/2012

this chapter, it does not mean that religion is the only reason for hijab, or even the most important one. In this section, I will illustrate the jurisprudential and religious reasons behind veiling from my informants' points of view.

Amongst the full traditional hijabi women who I interviewed, the most important reason they practice hijab is religion. Yeganeh, age 52, is a very well known gynaecologist. She has lived in London for 6 years with her family. She wears full traditional hijab, and states:

The main reason that I veil is that it is God's mandate. I think the reason God has ordered this is that it helps both men and women to have a better life, work together, and differentiate between sex and work. It helps men and women to have healthy relationships.¹⁰⁷

The women who have jurisprudential reasons for their hijab generally believe in strictly following the traditional *fiqh*. As mentioned, the limits defined in *fiqh* do vary according to religious authorities, and there are examples of women who have changed their dress code to maintain accord with changing juristic positions. What remains obscure in the narrative of Yeganeh is that it yields to the dominant jurisprudential reasoning. The narratives and problematisations of Ahmed (1992) and Amer (2014) even when they engage with a female driven *ijtihad* seems peripheral and even completely invisible in her approach. Equating the practice of hijab with God's command suffers from a lack of historical perspective and incomplete assessment of the social and political grounds of the codification of legal prescriptions in various Islamic communities.

I interviewed women who do not wear a headscarf, but still believe that they are observing hijab according to *fiqh* but with an understanding of different limits. A greater number of women who believe in hijab religiously observe the full hijab rather than choosing not to wear a scarf. Even fewer women who are religious have changed their dress code from wearing a scarf to not wearing a scarf while maintaining religious reasons.

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Yeganeh, conducted at Golders Green, 12/11/2012

Shahrzad, aged 29, is an example of a practising Muslim who does not wear a scarf. She is married and has a master degree in media. She has lived in London for two years because of her husband's work. From the time she arrived in London, she started going out without a headscarf, and her current dress code is 'conservative scarf-less'. Before coming to London, she lived in Tehran and wore full progressive hijab as well as *chador*. I asked her whether she believes in hijab, and she replied that she does still believe in hijab, but not in the conventional way, and she has her own limits. Torkashvand (2010), whose work I discussed in Chapter 3, strongly affected Sharhrzad's view about hijab. Shahrzad believes¹⁰⁸ that hijab is divinely mandated and that Muslim women should wear hijab, but in her view, covering one's hair and neck is not a necessary part of the hijab. She thinks that the rule of hijab in *fiqh* can be interpreted in different ways. She describes her first experience of not wearing a scarf in London:

When I came to London, after a while I started not wearing the scarf. Contrary to my expectations, I did not have a sense of guilt. I was very happy, and I felt that I was doing the right thing. I can clearly remember the feeling of wind against my ears. Before that, when I lived in Iran, I had read Ghabel's and Torkashvand's views of hijab. Wearing the chador became hard for me. After I came to London, I felt comfortable changing, because although I am still religious, I don't believe in the same limits as before. The reason that I am comfortable is that I have not announced that I am not wearing the scarf to my family or my husband's family. I also have not put a picture of myself without a scarf on Facebook. Because our family is religious, they will get upset if they find out.¹⁰⁹

In London, Shahrzad covers from her neck to her knees. She does not wear tops without sleeves or short skirts. But because she does not wear the scarf (which puts her under the category four of hijab – conservative hijab-less - in this thesis), the

¹⁰⁸ In this thesis, by stating someone believes in hijab, I mean he/she believes Muslim women should wear hijab as a religious obligation and that hijab is divinely mandated by Allah through Prophet Mohammad.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Shahrzad, conducted at Golders Green, 22/11/2012

majority of Iranians name her as a non-hijabi, although she believes that she follows hijab. This is stricter amongst religious families, where when a woman does not wear the scarf, they call her *bi-hijab* (meaning 'without hijab'). Shahrzad has not told her family and will not announce that she does not wear the headscarf, because the social and emotional costs for someone like her are very high. It is common that there is a social cost for those women who remove their scarf or hijab, and I will mention more examples in other informants' lives later in this chapter.

Transitions in dress code

In this section, I discuss the causes behind transitions in dress code amongst Iran-born women living in London. By transitioning in dress code, I mean changing from one of the five schemas of dress code to another.

Amongst the 40 women I interviewed, 20 experienced one or more transitions in their dress code. Out of these 20 women, 12 experienced this transition after they came to live in London. In this section, I focus on their stories. It is not possible to categorise these personal reasons for transition in dress code into overarching themes in the manner of the previous sections. Instead, it is best to tell the informants' stories one at a time in order to understand the trajectory of these changes in the context of their individual lives.

Mina

Mina is 30 years old, and has lived in London for five years. She has a master's degree in law, and is currently pursuing a second master's degree. She is married, comes from a religious background, and is currently a practising Muslim. Like many other girls in religious families, she started wearing a headscarf at the age of nine. In mainstream traditional Islamic jurisprudence, girls have to start praying, fasting, and wearing hijab at nine, while boys must start observing religious duties at 15. Unlike other girls who like to wear the headscarf because it makes them feel like the adults around them, Mina did not enjoy wearing the headscarf at first, especially in front of her cousin with whom she always played. Although she disliked it, her dress code was partial-hijab until the age of 15. Then she started wearing a *chador*, and

her dress code changed to full progressive hijab. The reason behind this change, in her words, is:

When I started wearing chador of my own will, I really loved my new dress code, because my family was religious and with chador, I gained credibility with them. It gave me a sense of being more spiritual, and provided extra protection. Although in my school, wearing chador was not compulsory, I wanted to wear it myself.¹¹⁰

Mina retained her full progressive hijab dress code while she completed her undergraduate degree and her master's degree. Meanwhile, she married. Her husband's family were not like her own family, and did not wear hijab. At the same time, she was studying human rights at university, and she started encountering more people who did not wear hijab. She started questioning her dress code and Islamic hijab in general, but she continued wearing *chador* until she completed her master's degree. She wanted to work for the government after her studies and knew that if she does not wear the *chador* it will be a disadvantage for her career.

Mina first encountered new interpretations about hijab in Islamic jurisprudence while still in Iran. She read Torkashvand and Ghabel's views on hijab (arguing hijab does not include covering the head and the hair), which caused a large shift in her perspective. Because Mina was a religiously observant Muslim, she believed that full hijab was obligatory, and treated full hijab as part of her devotion. After reading new juristic positions, encountering more non-hijabi women, and researching human rights, she started questioning her own dress code and stopped wearing *chador*. After a while, she loosened her headscarf, and she shifted her dress code to partial-hijab at the age of 25. Mina and her husband came to England when she was 26. The way she changed, in her own words, is as follows:

When I came to London, I still wore my headscarf, although my hair was out of it. I was scared of not wearing it. At that time, I did not feel any guilt from showing some of my hair, but I did feel guilty taking off my headscarf. Once I went out without a headscarf, and it was a

¹¹⁰ Interview with Mina, conducted at Euston, 24/10/2012

very bad experience for me. I felt terrible about myself and felt I was committing a sin. Thereafter, I kept my scarf. After a while, we moved to Cambridge, and the situation there was very different from London. In London, there are many hijabi women in the streets, but in Cambridge, it was very uncommon to wear a headscarf. We lived in a flat with a shared kitchen, and it was difficult for me to wear a scarf every time I had to go there. One day, I stopped wearing a headscarf. I did not believe in hijab as I used to, and wearing a scarf had many social costs for me. After I took off the headscarf, I stopped feeling stared at and I felt very comfortable. I felt I was a person like everybody else, and that was pleasant for me.¹¹¹

Mina changed her dress code from partial-hijab to conservative scarf-less, and after she returned to London, she maintained this manner of dress to the present. In her own view, the change in the strength of her belief in hijab and the new juristic positions changed her mind. She still limits her dress, but she is happy about her transition.

I asked Mina about her family's reaction, and she said that her parents were upset at first. Her aunts told her that she would not achieve salvation. Nevertheless, after a while, they accepted her. She attributes their acceptance to her continued religious Islamic practice. Many women who take off their hijab do so because they are no longer practising Muslims. Mina is proud of being religious and yet, at the same time, she does not wear the conventional Islamic dress code. She wants to fight against the stereotype that any religious Iranian must wear the headscarf.

Coming to England affected Mina's transition. She believes that without having experienced life in England she might have remained in doubt but unable to act. Although she read Torkashvand's and Ghabel's ideas while living in Iran, she could not change her manner of dress while there. She gained self-confidence in London that allowed her to make the change.

¹¹¹ Interview with Mina, conducted at Euston, 24/10/2012

Fereshteh

Fereshteh is 23 years old, and has lived in London for 9 years. She is studying History and Middle Eastern Studies. At our interview, which we conducted on a weekday at SOAS, she wore a tunic and jeans, with her hair in a ponytail and without makeup. Currently she follows a conservative scarf-less dress code, but she underwent a major transformation from full progressive hijab. Although her life story is unique, it is representative of the types of experiences that women in religious families have when they change their view and practice regarding hijab. The cost and pressures they face are immense.

Fereshteh, like many other girls in religious families, started wearing hijab from the age of nine. In her case, hijab meant wearing a scarf and *manto*¹¹². At that age, she was happy about wearing the scarf, because she saw herself as like her mother and other grownups. During her primary and secondary school, both of which were very strict religious environments, she liked her hijab and she also wore *chador*. For high school, she changed schools, and her new school was more open. Girls from non-religious backgrounds also attended. The first month was challenging for her, but after a while, she became used to the new environment.

Fereshteh believes that her high school environment forced her to think differently about her hijab. For the first time, she saw other girls who wore the scarf differently. Most of the mothers of her classmates were partial-hijabi. At the age of 13, Fereshteh and her family moved to London because of her father's job. From the age of 13 to 16, she followed the same dress code that she did in Iran, but without the *chador*. She wore a loose *manto* and a scarf with no hair showing. After the age of 16, she started questioning the hijab and was no longer happy with it. She also did not wear the scarf tightly, as she had done as a child. Now she showed her hair at the front.

It took her three years to convince her parents to accept her without the scarf. Finally, her parents were convinced, but they told her that she should still wear the scarf until they left London. Therefore, throughout her first year of university, she

¹¹² *Manto* is a piece of clothing resembling a long shirt or tunic that Iranian women have to wear in public. It can be short or very long, and can be tight or loose. The purpose of wearing it is to cover the body and hide its shape.

wore the scarf, and after her parents moved back to Iran, she stopped doing so. She is still very concerned that what she wears should be loose and long, because her mother wants her to wear very modest clothes.

I asked Fereshteh at what point she no longer felt any guilt at not wearing hijab, contrary to her childhood teaching, and what allowed her to reach that point. She responded:

From the age of nine, I started wearing hijab. I didn't understand why I was doing it. I just imitated the grownups. They encouraged me about my hijab, and I was completely happy, but I didn't understand its meaning. By 15, I understood that the reason to wear hijab had to do with sexuality. I got to the point that I realized my hijab no longer protected me from sexual harassment. Even when I wore chador, I received unwanted looks and sexual attention. I realised that my hijab did not protect me, and that it had no use. I also found that revealing my hair did not attract sexual attention and, in fact, it decreased sexual curiosity. At that age, I read many blogs. One of the bloggers mentioned that chador is the sexiest clothing from a man's point of view. The other important change was that I realised Islam does not require women to wear the scarf or long clothes. Hijab in Islam is more about identity. In my case, I don't like to show that I am a Muslim in the first place. All these things caused me to stop wearing the scarf.

Fereshteh's father told her that if she removed her headscarf, other parents in Iran would not let their girls study abroad alone. Parents would conclude that if Fereshteh removed her veil, their girl might do so as well. On the contrary, Fereshteh believes that the act of removing her headscarf could trigger girls and women within Iran to think about why they are wearing it. In the end, Fereshteh convinced her father and mother to accept her choice by telling them that wearing a scarf to protect other people is not fair to her.

Fereshteh's experience of removing her headscarf in London shows how hard it is for a person from a religious background to undertake such an act. There are many costs for these people, and they often go through an emotionally challenging time. Fereshteh's extended family still does not know that she does not wear the headscarf in London. She still wears the headscarf when she accompanies her parents to Iranian gatherings in London, and she wears full progressive hijab in Iran.

Arezo

Arezo's story is different from those mentioned above. She has undergone a major transformation from radical hijab-less to full conservative hijab. Amongst the Iranian women in London, the number of women who have changed from non-hijabi to hijabi is much smaller than the inverse. Arezo's story is unique because the context in which she changed is very different from the rest of the women who have transitioned.

Arezo is 31 years old and has lived in London for 14 years. She is currently doing a postdoctoral fellowship in astronomy. At the age of 23, she underwent a transition in her dress code and started observing hijab. With the exception of one of her aunts, her family are not very religious and they do not wear the headscarf. Before wearing the headscarf, Arezo had limits to her dress, and her mother did not allow her to wear very short skirts and very revealing tops.

After Arezo and her family moved to London, she started questioning the correct path and researching different religions. She came to the conclusion that she had found the right choice in Islam, and she investigated Islam in consultation with specialists, because her family were not strict practising Muslims. She reached the point that she knew that it was right to wear the hijab, but doing so was very hard for her. I asked her to describe the final trigger that led to her transition, and she said:

After I came to the conclusion that Islam was the right thing for me, I was happy about fasting and praying. Accepting hijab was hard for me because it made me envision some of my teachers at school in Iran who were very bad. I did not like them, and therefore I did not like to

wear it. One day, I was sitting in university with my friends, and one of them said, "Wow, check that ass out!" I turned my head around, and he was staring at the shape of a girl. I became very sad, and from that day on, I started noticing the way men look at women. Another important event was that my grandmother died. Deep inside me, I felt how lonely humans are. At the end, we will die. Therefore, the only one who we should please is God, and God wants us to observe hijab. On a Monday, I started wearing the headscarf, and from that time until now, I have not changed.¹¹³

Arezo and many other Iranian women have a binary of hijabi versus non-hijabi in their minds, which they associate with being modest versus immodest. Many hijabi religious women think that a woman is either hijabi and modest or non-hijabi and immodest. Arezo believes that if a woman wears hijab, she can control who can look at her and who cannot.

Women like Arezo accept the conventional belief that God requires women to cover all parts of their body except their hands and face. Furthermore, she associates salvation and other-worldly happiness with observing a humanly-constructed idea which is attributed to God. As discussed above and in Chapter 3, specialist historians or Islamic jurists do not universally approve this judgement. I have argued that while wearing modest clothes and not covering her head, a woman can still demonstrate that she does not welcome unwanted looks. However, there are religious Iranian women believe that if you want to be modest and powerful you have to observe hijab according to conventional Islamic jurisprudence. The two important causes of Arezo's transition come from accepting this view: first, she wears hijab because she believes it is the order of God. Secondly, she thinks that with hijab, men cannot take advantage of women or look at them sexually. Both of these came about as a result of existential encounters and social contacts which were unpleasant or challenging for her.

¹¹³ Interview with Arezo, conducted at Ealing, 1/12/2012

Wearing hijab has had many consequences for Arezo. The first and the most important of which is that she feels that her relationship with God is better, and she feels more spiritual, which gives her satisfaction. She also feels that she has more power to control who can look at her. At the same time, she experienced pain. Regarding the challenges of adopting more conservative dress, she said:

When I started wearing hijab, at first it was hard for me. The behaviour of people in society toward me changed dramatically. No one talked to me as they had done, or paid enough attention to me. I can remember that one night I was lying down in my bed and crying. I asked God, "Are you really happy that I am going through this much pain?" But now I am completely happy with my decision, and I am comfortable with it. Before wearing hijab, I would receive many comments about my appearance, as well as sexual proposals. I did not think that this was good. I haven't done anything for my appearance; it is God's creation. When someone plays good music, we should appreciate it, because the person who plays it has worked and practiced for it. I don't like to be appreciated based on how I look by random people in public.¹¹⁴

As I mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, there are general systems for classifying different reasons for observing hijab. Although many of my informants state that they have chosen to wear hijab, when their lives are examined more closely, multiple issues and pressures are often at play, and the word 'choice' is therefore frequently too vague to be useful.

Arezo, however, is one informant that I can unequivocally say has chosen to wear hijab by her own will, regardless of societal or family pressures. The context in which she was raised and her life situation do not normally lead someone to observe hijab. Her family are not hijabi, and they disagreed with her choice. The environment of her university and her job discouraged her from wearing the hijab. She is a beautiful girl, and her appearance is much better without the hijab than with it. Therefore, she

¹¹⁴ Interview with Arezo, conducted at Ealing, 1/12/2012

chose to observe hijab because she concluded it is the word of God. The only element missing in her approach is the issue of informed decision or choice. It is not clear how she would respond to arguments of people like Ghabel and Torkashvand (or for that matter Leila Ahmed and Sahar Amer). Having a more historically sensitive narrative could challenge many of the underlying assumptions of Arezo. The bottom line for her seems to be the equation of the practice of hijab with God's will and command.

The immense social pressure of traditional Islamic upbringing often leaves no room for women to think about different hijab options and to choose the most appropriate. The power behind the conventional interpretation of hijab in Islamic jurisprudence is often strong enough to push practising Muslims to wear hijab. Arezo has chosen to wear it, and she has faced many problems, but she is happy with it because she believes that it makes her a better person.

Wearing the hijab has changed Arezo's social life in a city like London. Many hijabi women I interviewed said that they feel respected when wearing their hijab in London. It may be that they say this because they have never experienced going without hijab, and therefore have not felt the difference. Arezo has experienced both wearing and not wearing the hijab, and she finds that the behaviour of people in society changes strikingly.

Even if we accept that this kind of hijab was an obligation in Prophet Mohammad's era, we have to note that hijab at the time of Prophet Mohammad was a privilege for practising Muslim women, and a sign of respect. The headscarf, when worn by a Muslim woman living in the West, is not a privilege—it actively reduces their social status. Arezo has experienced this directly, as she felt more welcome in public places when she did not wear the hijab. Nonetheless, hijab also helped her being more welcomed in the religious circles and amongst hijabi women and earned her a new network of Muslim friends.

Leili

Leili is 35 years old, and has lived in London for nearly three years. She is married and is pursuing her master's degree in Middle Eastern Studies. Before coming to London, she lived in Turkey for two years. Since leaving Iran five years ago, she has

not returned due to her political activism for women's rights. Leili was born into a religious family, and was brought up as religious. She attended strict religious primary, secondary, and high schools. Her parents were very active in the Islamic Revolution, and are conservative and ideological.

Throughout her life, Leili has experienced different transitions in her dress code. Like other girls in Iran from religious families, Leili started wearing the hijab at the age of nine. Leili asked her mother to buy her a *chador* at the age of 13. In her school, they gave gifts to those who wore *chador*, and with *chador* she felt grown up like her mother. From 13 to 22, she wore *chador* with complete consent and satisfaction. But during her time at university as an undergraduate, she started reading the works of religious intellectuals including Abdolkarim Soroush and Shabestari. After a while, her interpretation and understanding of religion changed. One consequence was that although she still believed in hijab, she came to believe that wearing the *chador* was not necessary. At 22, she stopped wearing *chador*.

At 26, Leili underwent another major change in dress code. Until then, she wore full progressive hijab. By this point, she had married. Her husband is not religious, and he preferred her without hijab, but never asked her not to wear the headscarf. One day, she returned home after work, and her husband and their close male friend were in the sitting room. Without telling her husband, she decided not to wear the headscarf anymore. Therefore, her dress code changed from full progressive hijab to conservative scarf-less. She only went without wearing the hijab in front of certain friends, and her family did not know anything about her change for close to a decade. Addressing the reason behind this change, she said:

Before I stopped wearing the headscarf in front of my friends, I had several investigations about religion and the status of women in Islam. I was also an active feminist in Iran working for an NGO focused on women's rights. For quite a while, I did not believe in hijab as I had in the past. The main reason was that hijab lost its function for me. I did not feel that it protected me. I had friends who told me that hijab even makes women sexier. In the beginning, it was hard for

*me not to wear it, even though I only went without it in front of certain friends. I was scared of people judging me.*¹¹⁵

Leili did not tell her family that she was not wearing the headscarf. From the ages of 26 to 30, she only went without a headscarf during certain private gatherings, and she wore partial-hijab in front of her family and in public places. At those private gatherings, however, her attire was conservative scarf-less. Even her choice of partial-hijab instead of full hijab was difficult for her family to accept, and that is why she could not tell them about her transition.

After she left Iran at age 30, she did not wear hijab either in Turkey or in London, but her family did not know. Currently, her dress code in London is radical hijab-less, because when she goes to swimming pool she wears a swimming suit. But when she goes to Iranian gatherings, she always takes care to wear clothes that are more conservative. She says:

*After I left Iran and lived in London, I noticed that people don't look at you. You are free to wear what you want and not to be scared of people staring at you. In London, limiting my dress code didn't have a function anymore, and therefore I am okay with wearing different styles of clothes. This is because, from the time I stopped wearing hijab, I have felt more comfortable about my body. When you cover yourself strictly, it sexualises your view of your own body. In my experience, going without hijab has not been a means of looking more beautiful or attractive. In my case, I look much more beautiful with the manto and the headscarf. But I decided not to wear it because I didn't feel myself in hijab anymore.*¹¹⁶

Leili had a second transition in her dress code after she left Iran—from conservative scarf-less to radical hijab-less. She announced this change publicly. As I mentioned, her family are very strict practising and ideological Muslims who are also supporters of the Islamic republic. Therefore, she did not tell her family while she lived in Iran

¹¹⁵ Interview with Leili, conducted at Belsize Park, 27/12/2012

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

that she went without the headscarf in some places. While she lived in London, many of her friends in Iran were detained because of their political activities. She was very unhappy that she could not be interviewed by the BBC or take part in conferences on her friends' situation in Iran's prisons. Finally, she decided to have an interview with the BBC about the situation of the prisoners. Many of her family members and friends saw her on TV, and the consequences were extreme.

Her parents did not speak to her for three months. After three months, they were so hurt by her act that they insisted that she stop appearing without hijab in the media. Leili found this time very painful, and emotionally she was broken. She started psychoanalysis because of her nightmares. She is still fighting for her rights, and her family is still angry with her. Every time they speak on the phone, her mother cries and begs her to wear the hijab again. Mothers love their children, and in our culture, when a child does not obey a command of God (in the mother's view), they cannot stand letting their child burn in hell in the afterlife. They become sad to their flesh and bone because of their child's act.

The consequences of Leili's transition of dress code have been very hard to manage, even though it was not sudden but happened over a long period. Leili's story is characteristic of the stories of many women from very religious families who remove their hijab. The amount of pressure and emotion on both sides is very high, and the damage done can prove unforgivable.

Living in London helped Leili decide to share her new identity as a non-hijabi woman with the public. When I asked her to describe the changes caused by coming to London, she said:

When I came to London, after a while I noticed that I no longer grip my hands when I walk in streets. In Iran, when I walked, I gripped my hands unconsciously because anything can happen to you and you always feel insecure. I also had some male housemates in a flat in London, and after a while, I noticed that I don't lock my door at night. This shows that I felt secure. I am sure that this would never have happened in Iran—having a male housemate and not locking the

*door. These two changes made me realise how differently this society makes you feel. I think that hijab highlights sexuality, and it makes your sexuality more obvious in your interactions.*¹¹⁷

Because of the situation in Iran, many people who believe in hijab see it as protection against sexual harassment. However, according to many of my informants, hijab did not provide them with protection, and even women wearing *chador* are sexually harassed. Those Iranians who have not experienced any place other than Iran cannot understand women who say that in London, we are stared at less and we are comfortable without the hijab.

Some critical reflections

The cases I examined above provide some overall themes for reflection about shifts in the practice of hijab or maintaining what a Muslim Iranian women has grown up with. In all of the above examples or a number of the elements I discuss below is at work.

Familiarity with scholarship on Islam and the hermeneutics of hijab

Even though all of these women are highly educated, not all of them are exposed to or familiar with views of scholars such as Fanaei, Ghabel or Soroush (among others). Some who may have been exposed to them resist these views because of their attachments to a more conservative narrative. Therefore, it is both an issue of education and development of critical skills to engage with the history and doctrines of a Muslim community. Those who are exposed to such critical debates and are sympathetic to them, find it much easier to change their practice of hijab.

Peer pressure and resistance from family

Women may have come to conclusions about adopting or relinquishing the practice of hijab purely on the grounds of peer pressure or resistance from family members. Such pressures create difficulties for women to exercise their choice and agency but they often fail to have a lasting effect and once the inner justification for observing

¹¹⁷ Ibid

the hijab goes away and women find the arguments redundant or impractical, they would sooner or later relinquish it. A vivid example can be seen in experiences of sexual harassment: women feel it with their flesh and blood that the hijab is in no way a singular or effective deterrent for sexual harassment.

Disillusionment with the Islamic Republic

The ruling state in Iran has played a very significant role in determining the limits and rules of hijab. The coercive and unreasonable policies of the centres of power combined with the rampant hypocrisy and weakening of broader ethical norms has further weakened the grip of the state on more personal codes of conduct including the practice of veil. Political events such as the reformist movement and the Green Movement with its tragic social and political consequences have played a part in opening up the space to further interrogate and question the validity and authenticity of the claims of the state. This reaction may not necessarily be based on a rational argument. It is often an emotional response and resulting from a feeling of desperation and being discriminated against. Yet, this feeling is also corroborate by arguments which are hardly scarce after over three decades of the history of the Islamic Republic.

Breakdown of clichés of protection against sexual harassment

I briefly mentioned this point earlier but it is fundamentally related to how women change their perspectives about the hijab. One of the most dominant arguments in favour of practicing hijab has been this binary of protection vs. restriction. Once the felt experience and existential encounters of women both in Iran and in London allow the argument to be tested in real life situations, the entire dichotomy becomes subject to refutation.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined the various rationales behind schemas of dress and transitions in dress within my group of informants. Although each individual has her own story, these examples demonstrate that hijab plays a central role in the everyday life of Iranians, even in the diasporic context. Due to the political situation

in Iran, hijab has become a potent symbol. It is the first cue that people use to judge each other. In the Iranian context, the style of hijab worn and dress code followed are statements of political and religious views. Transformations in dress code can have pervasive consequences and produce profound challenges in women's personal and social lives. This is especially true for women from religious families.

Many of my informants said that they observe hijab to be a better person, because it is the word of God. Often the primary reason women wear hijab is that they think it is obligatory for Muslims. Therefore, they claim that they have chosen to wear it, and that they are happy with it. As I discussed in detail in Chapter 3, there are different ways of interpreting hijab practice in Islam. However, the common view in Iran and amongst Iranians is that covering all parts of body except hands and face is required. If in the future other interpretations become predominant, and covering the head and hair is no longer seen as obligatory, then I believe that many women will not feel they are disobeying God when they do not wear the headscarf.

Living in London has prompted some of my informants to think about the rationale behind their dress code choices, and provided them the opportunity to change. The social pressures preventing women from removing their hijab in Iran are very strong. London has prepared some women to make this change, although they still face major consequences.

Conclusion

In the aftermaths of the attacks in Paris and Brussels in 2016, the political and social climate of European societies turned even more difficult for Muslim women. In an essay published by Charlie Hebdo in March 2016, the author sharply attacks the foundations of arguments that try to exonerate Muslim women or keep them out of this ideological battle and proposes:

Take this veiled woman. She is an admirable woman. She is courageous and dignified, devoted to her family and her children. Why bother her? She harms no one. Even those women who wear the total, all-encompassing veil do not generally use their clothing to hide bombs (as certain people were claiming when the law to ban the burqa was being discussed). They too will do nothing wrong. So why go on whining about the wearing of the veil and pointing the finger of blame at these women? We should shut up, look elsewhere and move past all the street-insults and rumpus. The role of these women, even if they are unaware of it, does not go beyond this¹¹⁸.

At the end of the essay, the author turns the table around and charges:

The first task of the guilty is to blame the innocent. It's an almost perfect inversion of culpability. From the bakery that forbids you to eat what you like, to the woman who forbids you to admit that you are troubled by her veil, we are submerged in guilt for permitting ourselves such thoughts. And that is where and when fear has started its sapping, undermining work. And the way is marked for all that will follow (ibid).

Here, women and all those who argue that the choice of their dress code must be left out of this fierce argument are all guilty by association. The response which was published shortly after in the *London Review of Books* was uncompromising.

¹¹⁸ See <https://charliehebdo.fr/en/edito/how-did-we-end-up-here/> last accessed 30 April 2016.

The author, Adam Shatz, pointed out a conflation which is all too familiar when it comes to issues of women:

...A robust contribution to this *amalgame*, or conflation, between Islam and citizens of Muslim faith or origin, is also being made by people who claim to be merely criticising Islam, but go out of their way to insult Muslims. They deploy a tactical ambiguity, not unlike those who deplored the influence of Judaism in French life in the late 19th century, and accused anyone who denounced anti-Semitism of suppressing free speech¹¹⁹.

The above critique follows the same line of argument that Miriam Cooke provides when she assesses the position of Moghisi towards Islamic feminists (discussed in earlier chapters). But what goes on in the academia already has a political partner in the public space. This, however, is only the European side of a battle in which all Muslim women are caught.

In 2010, in a sermon delivered in Tehran's Friday prayer, Ayatollah Kazem Sedighi, the Imam of the prayer, declared that bad hijab is one of the contributing factors to the emergence of natural disasters including earthquakes¹²⁰. His comments faced strong reactions from a wide range of women but the core of his argument reflected the more entrenched perception of a traditional and conservative society which viewed disregard for hijab in the strict sense a sin which would have other-worldly repercussions.

In a more recent expression, Ayatollah Ahmad Alamolhoda, the Friday prayer Imam of Mashhad, made some comments published on his Instagram account which quickly went viral¹²¹. He argued that *badhijabi* is a great sin which leads to other sins and damages other people including the men who are tempted and aroused at the sight of a woman's hair and makeup. He even went further and claimed the *badhijabi* is even worse than embezzlement which is now one of the

¹¹⁹ See <http://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2016/04/05/adam-shatz/how-did-we-end-up-here/> last accessed 30 April 2016

¹²⁰ See <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8901270510> last accessed 30 April 2016

¹²¹ See <http://khabaronline.ir/detail/525043/Politics/parties> last accessed 30 April 2016

hottest topics of discussions after the legacy of the 8 years of the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Complicity of the former government in financial corruptions is thus downplayed when compared to women's dress code.

These examples, one from a radically secular society and one from senior conservative religious figures in Iran, vividly capture the precarious situation of women who are constantly caught in the crossfire of comments that specifically target their body, their dress code and their choices in life. Both of these approaches turn the case of veil into a common battlefield. They are mirror images of one another. In both cases, it is women who are the receiving end of such attacks.

In this thesis, I studied the shifts in the dress code of Iranian women who live in London. I embarked upon a more critical assessment of the problem: why do these women change their dress code? This question opened a wide array of other questions too. I investigated further the historical, political and social background of the seemingly opposing narratives of the likes I just mentioned. In chapter Two, I provided an assessment of how colonial policies in Middle Eastern and Oriental societies were informed by a view that defined Islam as the categorical opposite of modernity and secularism which was uniquely and specifically defined in Occidental terms. The narrative traces back the history of these confrontations to the colonial period but recent events in the past two decades have added fodder to the flame and reignited an already paralysing debate.

The view that 'Islam' denigrates women and is the key most fundamental contributor to oppressing women and depriving them of their rights stood in sharp contrast with the view that modernity in its colonial vehicle was the most important factor in the decline and decay of Muslim communities. Muslim reformers oscillated between these two sides. Men and women who were seen as champions and forerunners of women's rights in the Muslim world had to find their way through these narratives. State sponsored and enforced project of modernisation in Iran and Turkey in early 20th century resulted in all kinds of reactions whose consequences only reflected themselves in later generations. As

much as these impositions of secular modernity brought about greater improvements in women's access to education – which was viewed by the conservative and religious people as an anathema connected to the West – the reactions remained dormant but active. The 1979 revolution in Iran brought to power a state that introduced measures for making the veil compulsory for all Iranian women. The revolution itself also led to the mass migration of Iranians in different episodes for different political, social and religious reasons.

In this research, given the backdrop of political and intellectual movements, I have interrogated some of the key questions and themes that are central to shifts in the practice of hijab among Muslim Iranian women in London. In the broader framework of analysis, I identified three interconnecting themes that were part of the debates on women's dress code.

The first one was the issue of women's choice and agency. In all cases where women have changed their dress code (either adopting the veil or relinquishing it), the issue of choice and agency is problematized and interrogated. In neither case can one automatically assume that a change in practice is a result of choice or agency. Women's exercise of agency is often hampered by patriarchal orders and male-dominated narratives about women's body, sexuality and dress code. Yet, with the rise of Islamic feminism, women themselves contributed significantly to developing new discourses which were no longer exclusively dictated by male scholars, intellectuals or authorities. Nonetheless, male scholars and innovative thinking of certain jurists – who also had political reasons for their rethinking of the norms of hijab – did contribute positively to these shifts. I have provided evidence of how the contributions of people like Kadivar, Ghabel, Torkashvand and Fanaei opened up a new perspective for women who were not otherwise aware of these alternative or different views about Islam and its rules on hijab.

The second issue which has been a dominant and almost perennial theme in discussions about the veil was the false binary of oppression vs. protection. The argument that the veil should not be seen as limitation and restriction for women's social and political participation was forcefully promoted after the 1979 revolution

in Iran but the negative effects still remained to unravel themselves in the coming years. Women realised over the years that the veil in and by itself did not provide any visible protection against undesired or unwanted affronts of men in their social interactions on their body and the sexual aspects of their lives. The findings of this research demonstrates that this binary has been prone to collapse and as Iranian women see the shaky grounds of the argument in Iran and more evidently in London, they can no longer convince themselves of the veracity of the argument. The rational assessment of most of my informants who were highly educated women deeply questioned the premises of the argument in defence of a fixed and strict observance of hijab on traditional and conservative lines.

The third theme which runs across the findings of this research deals with the encounter of Muslim women with modernity and secularism. Both theoretically and practically, these women were concerned about modernity but did not view it in Orientalist and colonial terms which had led to confrontations in their home countries and abroad up until contemporary times. They did not express any kind of reaction to modernity when they thought of their own value systems. Even though their understanding and interpretation of Islam is not the product of scholarly engagement with it, they do not see Islam inherently at odds with modernity. They have carved out their own versions of modernity which runs parallel to the radical secularism (the likes of which are displayed in positions of Charlie Hebdo). Nonetheless, there is a growing sense of secularity in the way these women practice the hijab. And by secularity, I do not mean the totalising and all-encompassing grip of European and Orientalist perceptions of it (that people like Edward Said criticised). In discussions about hijab, I noted instances in which Iranian women in London visibly described their veil and its practice outside categorisations of moral standards. They are increasingly moving towards making their dress code more neutral. In a sense, they are rescuing their dress code from norms dictated by a male-driven discourse.

This narrative is not always so straightforward to explicit. There are often other forces at play which condition these factors in different ways. Political developments in Iran which continued to resonate in the daily lives of these

women in London have contributed significantly to their revisiting of the issue of hijab. The coercive policies of the state in Iran has had unintended consequences not only among women who did not already define themselves as practicing Muslims but also among those for whom the practice of hijab seemed integral to their Muslim identity.

Politics in Iran has not simply affected women directly leading to their repositioning towards hijab. Shifts in the power structure after the first decade of the revolutionary state, the succession issues and the emergence of new political ideologies led to marginalisation of forces which were otherwise at the centre of giving an 'Islamic' narrative of the social and political participation of women. The discourse of protection vs. restriction (which has continued from the early days of the revolution) has now found new protagonists who define themselves in contradistinction with forces who were once viewed as revolutionaries and now as reformists. Reforms and the development of the discourse of religious intellectuals in Iran had far reaching consequences. One of them was about questioning the pervasive influence of *fiqh* in all aspects of life for all Iranians including Iranian women. The expectation that religion – read *fiqh* – could provide answers to every single question and problem was gradually replaced by a more modest claim that allowed more room for the rational engagement of individuals with their faith. Religious intellectuals closely identified with the political project of reforms in an effort to limit the powers of the state which presented itself under the mantle of religion as the perfect system.

One of the other themes which surfaced during the course of this research was the issue of consumerism and fashion. My research concluded that women who wear a make-up (mild or thick) do not correlate fashion (either in dress or make-up) with the veil. Almost all of my informants had some degree of make-up and keeping up with fashion was evident in their dress code (the exception being the very traditional women). In short, fashion and consumerism did not inhibit these women from negotiating their choices of dress code.

Islamic feminism also flourished in the midst of these tensions. Even though Islamic and secular feminists were equally targets of state restrictions which often displayed itself in the form of confrontations with the reformist government of Mohammad Khatami, the discourse has gained traction. Iranian women were directly or indirectly exposed to these debates. The rise of the social media contributed to the spread of feminist views and their campaigns in the online environment. The campaign of 'No to Compulsory Hijab' brought together people, men and women, from all walks of life in response to the coercive measures of the state which have relentlessly continued until the present time. These campaigns were in no small measure insignificant to a shift in the opinions of some of my informants.

While Islamic feminists have vociferously struggled to push the boundaries of the discourse on hijab, as findings of my research suggests, there is still a large number of women whose knowledge about hijab relies almost exclusively on what male scholars produce. Their assessment of shifts in dress code and how they challenge the arguments which support hijab remains limited to the views of these scholars who happen to be among supporters of the political project of reforms. Several stages of reformist struggle in Iran, from the presidency of Mohammad Khatami to the emergence of the Green Movement and the rising to power of Hassan Rouhani have been significant events for boosting these shifts. Even though at the state level, these policies have remained strong, they have further disillusioned more Muslim Iranian women, including those who live in London, about the rationale of the imposition of hijab. But what continues to be the problem is the perpetuation of the male-driven discourse. There were no women who referenced the work of a single female writer or feminist (Islamic or secular). Despite their lack of reference to the vast body of literature which is often translated into Farsi, the actual outcome is still a visible shift in the practice of hijab.

The years ahead may prove bumpier to Iranian women in London than one might envisage given the intensified focus on 'Islam' and Muslims in the wake of contemporary political incidents both in Europe and in the Middle East. Women continue to be thrown into the midst of these debates. Some of my informants

were particularly cognisant of this climate. Even though they now found the conventional arguments in support of hijab no longer convincing, the current political atmosphere led them to maintain a peculiar form of hijab to assert their identity and at the same time express their objection to the discrimination and racism which prevails in some cases at the expense of a secularism and a modernity which is supposed to move away from such parochial reactions to the *other*.

In this research, I have endeavoured to provide my critical observations in between the responses from my informants to make connections with the themes I have identified as important for this shift. I have been critical of a linear and strict narrative of secular ways of life. Yet, a mild version of secularity seems growing among Muslim women when it comes to the issue of the veil (and all the other aspects which are associated with it such as shaking hands with men). The fact that for many of my informants the veil itself is getting disenchanted and they no longer consider the veil an inseparable article of faith is interesting even though none of them have specifically articulated the point in these terms.

One of the immediate findings of this research for me was to come up with a more nuanced and problematized narrative of choice and agency. Where adopting the veil may be easily seen as an act of conscious choice (and while questioning informants, they point this out), there may be other factors in play such as peer pressure at work or in university that might have contributed to the adoption of veil. Similarly, relinquishing the veil could have a similar caveat. None of these are either way in total contradistinction with the exercise of agency in and by themselves. The most important factor is that these women live in a liberal European society which does provide them something which they could not otherwise have: civil liberties which are not overtly restricted by state policies against women. This descriptive account might play into the hands of those who would emphatically argue against the opponents of colonial narratives of modernity. It is as if they seek and provide further evidence of this Oriental despotism which is irrational and oppressive. Such arguments are more than anything else inductive and tend to rely extensive on justification, verification and

evidence rather than being open to falsifiability. The case of these Iranian women provides ground for falsification of such claims.

I am aware of all the limitations of this research. A more comparative study which could look at the case of other Muslim women in London could have probably shed more light on some other aspects of this issue. In particular, the question of religious authority seems a relevant question. Comparisons of different models of religious authority could further boost the arguments I have provided here, but they fall beyond the scope of this research.

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